

BIRD LIFE AND BIRD LORE

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THE RAVEN.

From a Drawing by G. E. Lodge.

[Frontispiece.]

BIRD LIFE AND BIRD LORE

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"THE LIFE OF LORD LAWRENCE," ETC.

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PREFACE

MOST of the chapters in this book appeared originally as articles in the *Nineteenth Century*, during the years 1902-1904; and I wish to thank the editor, Sir James Knowles, for his kind permission to reprint them after a shorter interval than is usual. They have all been carefully revised, and have, in many places, been recast and received large additions. Of the other chapters, one, that upon "The Wild Duck," was published, many years ago, in *Bailey's Magazine*. The account of the Short-eared Owl appeared, as recently as August last, in the shape of a separate article in the *Outlook*, and it was followed up in October by a second article in the same paper, on the birds of Norfolk. To the editors both of *Bailey's Magazine* and the *Outlook*, I have to return my grateful acknowledgments for the leave which they have given me to reproduce them.

The remaining chapter, "The Old Manor House and its Surroundings," which appears now for the first time, explains itself. The Old Manor House of Bingham's Melcombe is to my later life, in its relation to birds, something of what the "Old Thatched Rectory" at the little village of West Stafford, was to my earlier years; and the chapter describing it serves, among other purposes, to give to the birds of which the next one treats, "a local habitation, and a name." Its old grey walls and its surroundings seem to enhance the charms, and even, to some extent, to modify the habits of the birds which haunt them; while they, in their turn, lend something of life, of activity, of enjoyment, of music to the atmosphere of peace and undisturbed repose which always seems to hover over its ancient precincts.

It will be observed that in a portion of two of the chapters, those on the Thatched Rectory, and on the Manor House, I have dropped, for the time, my special subject of birds, and have endeavoured to bring out something of the characteristics, the manners, and the ideas of the country folk. Birds have their human surroundings, and, in spite of their much greater natural powers of locomotion, are often as strictly local in their habits as the villagers them-

selves. They are, both of them, "attached to the soil," in the best sense of that phrase, by hereditary instincts, by association of ideas, and by inclination. It is natural, therefore, in one who loves the country in all its aspects, to endeavour to give to his favourite birds something of a human setting or background, especially when the inhabitants are so interesting in themselves, and have, as yet, been so little influenced by the rush and crush of modern town life.

Birds have been to me the solace, the recreation, the passion of a lifetime, the more serious and continuous work of which has lain in quite other directions ; and in collecting, now that I am somewhat advanced in years, some of my out-of-door experiences, and the results of such study of the literature of the subject as I have been able to give to it, into the form of a book, my object has been twofold : first, to communicate, as far as possible, to others, some portion of the enduring happiness which the love of birds has given to me ; and, secondly, to do all that lies in my power towards the preservation of all birds, more especially of those interesting and beautiful species which are habitually persecuted till, in many parts of the country, they are threatened with actual extinction ;

some of them, through the mere lust of killing, others, through an inordinate, and selfish, and short-sighted love of sport, which often defeats its own object.

Let me, even at the risk of anticipating what may and must be said repeatedly, in other shapes, in other parts of the volume, endeavour to explain in a word or two, the scope and limits of my work as regards these two main objects.

First, my book does not aim at exhausting all the knowledge that can be obtained even of those birds of which it treats most fully. It contains a series of studies or of sketches rather than of complete pictures. Nor does it pretend to be "scientific" in the strict, perhaps I might rather say, in the narrower sense of that word. My knowledge of anatomy and physiology, interesting and essential though these studies are to "scientific" knowledge, leaves a good deal to be desired. I say nothing of the weights or of the measurements of birds, or of the exact length of their feathers. I could not dissect a bird, even if I would. I would not dissect it, even if I could. My book deals, not with the dead, but with the living bird; least of all, does it deal with the bird that has been "stuffed"—hateful word—and confined for ever within the

uninviting prison of a glass case. It is conversant with birds in the freshness of the prime, in their noon-tide dreams, in their renewed activity at the approach of evening. If it, in any degree, answers its purpose, it will take my readers, some of them, perhaps, for the first time in a newly awakened love for the subject—even as it has taken me back, as I have been writing in my study, in imagination and in happy memories—to the barn or to the belfry, to the marsh or to the meadow, to the heather or to the bracken, to the cosiest corner in the thatched roof, or to the barren ledges of the rifted rock, to the tangled thickets of the common, or to the “bare backs of the bushless downs.” Above all, it will take them to the deep silence of the solemn oak or pine woods, or to those clumps of weather-beaten Scotch firs, which in Dorset more, I think, than in most counties, crown the knolls or hilltops, form the main landmarks on the horizon, bind, with invisible cords, the most widely scattered portions of the county, each to each, and, with their dreamy outlook on the centuries of the past, perhaps also on the centuries of the future, awake, in those who know and love them well, “thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.” It deals with the homes and haunts of birds, their times and

their seasons, their eggs and their nests, their notes and their food, their loves and their hates, their merry courtships and their parental anxieties, their intense local and family attachments, and their still more imperious instincts of migration. In other words, it aims at penetrating, as far as may be, behind the bright eyes—and few eyes are so bright as those of a bird—behind the graceful shapes, the lissom movements, the beautiful mask of feathers, to the eager little life, vivid, attractive, mysterious, almost, but not, I think, quite impenetrable, which underlies them all. By so doing, it aims at creating an interest in birds, a sympathy with them which, if once awakened, will, perchance, never go to sleep again; but like a love of flowers, will give a kind of sixth sense to its possessor, lending a fresh charm to every walk, to every copse, to every hedgerow, peopling them with ever appearing, ever disappearing, friends—friends who were hitherto unnoticed and unknown—and enabling the eye to see what it has never properly seen, the ear to hear what it has never fully heard, and the imagination to picture to itself what it has never consciously imagined before.

It will be observed that many, indeed most of the birds which have most attracted me, which I

have had most opportunity of observing, and which, therefore, I have described most fully, such as the raven, the various species of the owl, the magpie, the rook, the jackdaw, the cuckoo, the swallow, the kingfisher and the woodpecker are also those which have had the most enduring influence on the thoughts, the hopes, the fears, and the out-lookings of man. They have played a large part in history, in poetry, in painting, in sculpture, in folk-lore, in legend, sacred and profane; and it has been not the least interesting part of my work to attempt to bring out this close historical connection of birds with man, by somewhat copious quotations from the poets, and by illustrations drawn from every quarter, ancient or modern, to which I have been able to obtain access.

Secondly, and as the result of the first, it is my earnest hope that the book may tend towards the better protection and preservation of all birds; and most of all, of those which need it most. I have some reason, indeed, to believe, from communications which have reached me from all parts of the country, that such has been already, to a considerable extent, the result of the articles, as they appeared in their original and more fugitive shape. The pole-trap, with all its unspeakable tortures, has,

since my paper on owls was first published, been abolished by law. I have thought it well, however, in spite of the passing of the Bill, to leave the passages in which I denounced it exactly as they originally stood, and that for two reasons. First, because in the eyes of lovers of birds, they may, perchance, have acquired, as a humble contributing cause to so happy a result, some little additional historical interest of their own; and, secondly, and much more important, because to pass a Bill into law is, unfortunately, not the same thing as to see it carried out, especially when the means of evading it are comparatively easy, and when the permanent forces of ignorance, of selfishness, of *laissez faire*, or of indifference to animal-suffering — as is the case with some game-preservers, and many, or indeed most gamekeepers—are arrayed on the other side. Much must depend, henceforward, on the zeal and energy of the county magistrates, of the county councils, of the county police, if the law is to be properly carried out. Almost as I write, I hear from a brother who has just returned from Scotland that he saw, on the open moor, a pole-trap, “naked and yet not ashamed,” in full and hideous operation there; and, only a month or two ago, I heard from a friend on the borders of the

county of Dorset, that a gamekeeper finding, I presume, that he could no longer, with impunity to himself, put up pole-traps on his master's ground, had induced the gardener of a large garden which adjoined one of his owl-haunted covers, to plant the forbidden instrument of torture there, and that, in the few weeks it was allowed to remain, it had caught and lacerated to death seven owls of various kinds—for every week, in fact, an owl!

Much has been done of late, by various public bodies or private individuals, towards inculcating greater kindness to animals, wild as well as domesticated. The Society for "the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals" and that for "the Protection of Birds," have, each of them, done a noble, and, as it would seem, an ever extending work. The horrors of the slaughter-house have been, in some measure, diminished by moral influences; and it is to be hoped, now that the Commission on the subject have, at length, published their Report, that it will not be long before the remaining abuses are, as far as possible, swept away by law. Admirable books like those by Richard Jeffries, Mr Ward Fowler, Mr Cornish, Mr Dixon, Sir Herbert Maxwell, Mr Hudson, and Mr Kearton, not to mention half a dozen others of the same type,

have awakened a new and keener sympathy with animal life, and specially with birds. But much remains to be done. In particular, it must be remembered that much that I have said in denunciation of the pole-trap, may, *mutatis mutandis*, be said, in lesser degree, of other modes, which are still in full employment, of capturing or killing wild animals.

The heart of my book, the germ from which most of it has been developed, is to be found, if I mistake not, in the chapter on "The Old Thatched Rectory and its Birds." In the rapid changes of the years, it may soon be said with only too much truth—even in the county of Dorset, which knew the value of Stafford Rectory and its associations best—in the words of one of the most exquisitely pathetic poems ever written, that by Cowper "on the receipt of his mother's picture out of Norfolk":

"'Tis now become a history little known

That once we called the pastoral-house our own."

But short-lived memories do not necessarily make good influences to be short-lived also; and, if I may be allowed to do so, I would thankfully acknowledge, with all filial reverence, that if there be anything in this book which, in spite of all

its shortcomings, of which indeed no one can be half so conscious as myself, leads to a closer observation of Nature, or to a deeper and more living sympathy with animal life, it is due, in its origin at least, to the influences which permeated "The Old Thatched Rectory."

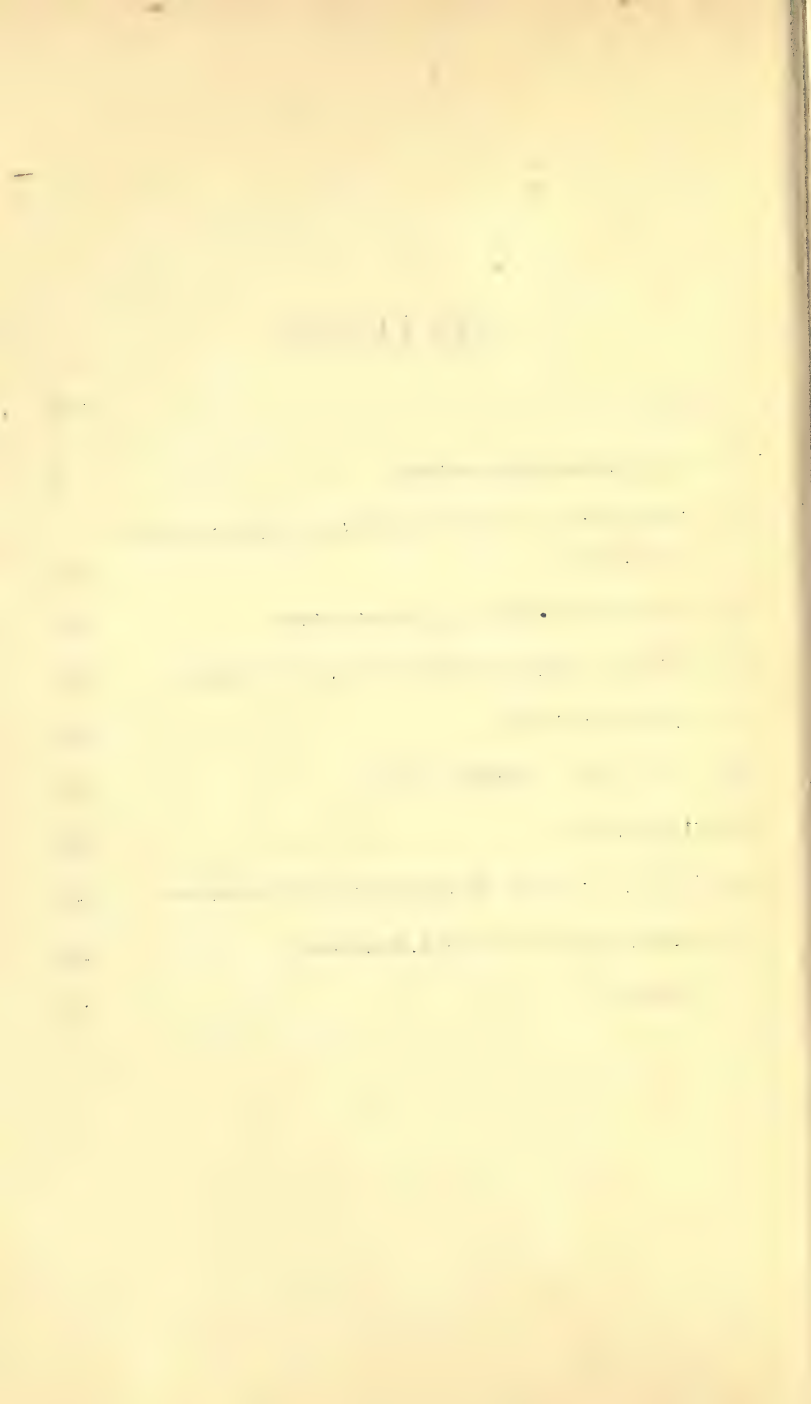
BINGHAM'S MELCOMBE,

November, 1904.



CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. OWLS	1
II. THE RAVEN—DESCRIPTIVE	75
III. THE RAVEN IN POETRY, HISTORY, HAGIOLOGY, AND FOLK-LORE	107
IV. THE RAVEN—PERSONAL EXPERIENCES	141
V. THE OLD THATCHED RECTORY AND ITS BIRDS	184
VI. THE WILD DUCK	238
VII. A DAY ON A NORFOLK MERE	262
VIII. THE MAGPIE	281
IX. THE OLD MANOR HOUSE AND ITS SURROUNDINGS	333
X. BIRD LIFE AT BINGHAM'S MELCOMBE	369
APPENDIX	419



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

RAVEN. <i>From a drawing by G. E. Lodge</i>	.	.	<i>Frontispiece</i>
BARN OWLS (<i>from a drawing by G. E. Lodge</i>).			
BROWN OR TAWNY OWL	.	.	<i>Face page 12</i>
CHERUBIM SHOOTING. <i>From a print in "Sporting Anecdotes," 1804</i>	.	.	" 22
EAGLE OWL. <i>From a drawing by G. E. Lodge</i>	.		" 40
BADBURY RINGS. <i>From a drawing by Josephine Blundell</i>	.	.	" 142
RAVEN TARN. <i>From a sketch by Lorna Bosworth Smith</i>	.	.	" 150
YOUNG RAVENS	.	.	" 154
STAFFORD RECTORY. <i>Photo by W. Pouncy, Dorchester</i>			" 186
STAFFORD RECTORY. <i>Photo by W. Pouncy, Dorchester</i>			" 216
MAGPIE. <i>From a drawing by G. E. Lodge</i>	.	.	" 282
CLYFFE CLUMP. <i>From a drawing by Fanny Kindersley</i>	.	.	" 296
THE HERON. <i>From a photo by Mr Bushby</i>	.	.	" 320
THE GATEHOUSE, BINGHAM'S MELCOMBE	.	.	" 338
BINGHAM'S MELCOMBE	.	.	" 342
THE OLD GARDEN WALLS, BINGHAM'S MELCOMBE			" 344
THE GREEN WOODPECKER. <i>From a drawing by G. E. Lodge</i>	.	.	" 408



BIRD LIFE AND BIRD LORE

CHAPTER I

OWLS

THERE is no bird which, in view of its strange and solitary character, its weird and hollow cries, the grotesque solemnity of its appearance, the time-honoured beliefs and superstitions which cluster round it, the large part it has played in poetry, ancient and modern, as well as in its sister arts, sculpture and painting, the marvellous adaptations of its structure to its mode of life, or its mode of life to its structure—above all, perhaps I ought to add, in these days of agricultural depression and of armies of destroying rats and mice, its usefulness to the struggling cultivator of the soil—possesses so peculiar a fascination, and ought to enjoy so jealous and zealous a protection, as the various species of the owl.

I purpose in this chapter to touch lightly on some of these points of interest, in the hope that I may be able to impart to those who read it some fragments of the pleasure which a loving and life-long observation of its subject has given to me, and may induce all who are connected directly or indirectly with the land, to befriend a bird which, in spite of many prejudices and some appearances to the contrary, is, in the truest sense, the friend of man.

I will premise only that my field of observation has been chiefly confined to the county of Dorset, to the neighbourhood of the little village in which I was born and bred, West Stafford, near Dorchester ; to the grammar school at Blandford where I received the first part of my education, and whose headmaster, the Rev. J. Penny, encouraged all his pupils, both by precept and example, to become, in their measure, observers of Nature—and to the old-world Manor House of Bingham's Melcombe, in which, now that the main work of my life, as a master at Harrow, is over, I hope to end my days, a veritable sanctuary of wild life and of "my feathered friends." I shall confine what I have to say chiefly to the four more familiar varieties of the bird which are to be found in England—the white,

the brown, the long-eared, and the short-eared. Nature varies indeed, but within strict limits ; and what is true of the owl in the county of Dorset, is true, with very slight modifications, of the owl in all parts of England—and, indeed, in all parts of the world.

All owls have much in common. The difference in their appearance—caused by the fact that some of their number, as, for instance, the eagle, the long-eared, and the short-eared owl, have little tufts of feathers on the top of their heads, which they can raise or depress at pleasure, and which look like ears, or horns, or egrets—is a merely superficial difference. They are, each and all of them, unlike all other birds. A child who has never seen one except in a picture, and who knows, perhaps, hardly any birds beyond the sparrow, the robin, and the barndoor fowl, never fails instantly to recognise an owl. An English child, perhaps I ought rather to say ; for “the child is father of the man ;” and a German child could hardly be expected to recognise an owl at sight, if it be true, as the story, told me by my friend Canon Ainger, goes, that a German professor on a visit to England, who had somehow succeeded in shooting an owl, holding up his trophy in triumph, exclaimed,

"Zee, I have shot a schnipe mit einem face Push-cats."

The nocturnal movements of the owl tribe ; the upright position in which they habitually hold themselves ; the big, rounded head ; the full, round, prominent eyes, which, except when they are glazed with sleep, look you full in the face, for the simple reason that, unlike those of other birds, they are planted in front, rather than at the side of the head ; the successive bands of short soft feathers which surround the eye, all pointing inwards, and so making it the centre, as it were, not of one, but of many circles ; the fluffy feathers of the body, which make the whole appear twice as large as it really is—for an owl, though he will gorge, or try to gorge, a fair-sized rat, is always thin—nothing, in fact, but skin and bones and feathers ; the sleepy air of contemplation or of wisdom which probably made the Athenians regard it as the sacred bird of Pallas ; the eyelid behind eyelid which passes swiftly, now one, now another, over the eye, shielding it from the garish light of day, and tempering the apparent gravity of its thought by a suspicious though superficial resemblance to a wink ; all mark off the subject of this chapter, in all its species, from all other birds.

The white owl is so called because, though the whole of his upper plumage is of a delicate buff or yellow speckled with grey, as his Latin name, *Strix flammea* implies, it is the pure white of the lower plumage which most strikes the eye, as he sails noiselessly over a stubble field or along a hedge. He is known also as the barn and the screech owl—the barn owl from one of his favourite haunts; the screech owl because of his rasping, piercing shriek, so unlike to the deep, mellow, musical hoot of his nearest relations. As he is the best known, so he is the best worth knowing, and the most useful of all his tribe. When left unmolested, as he ought to be, he becomes almost domestic in his habits, cruising around the rickyard or the homestead in search of his prey, and often taking temporary refuge, should the morning light surprise him, in any tumble-down shed which is near at hand. The resort which he most frequents is a dark cobwebbed barn in which corn, or newly or badly threshed straw, is stored: for thither troop rats by scores and mice by hundreds, and there, ready for the farmer's greatest foe, is the farmer's truest friend, eager to destroy the destroyers. There he stands, bolt upright, perched on one leg, perfectly motionless, in some dark niche or on some lofty

rafter, to all appearance fast asleep. But he sleeps with one eye or one ear open. There is a slight movement, invisible to the human eye; a slight rustle, inaudible to the human ear, in the straw below. In a moment he is all eye, all ear. The tucked-up leg joins the other; the head is bent forward and downward; the dark bright eyes gaze with an almost painful intensity on the spot from which the rustle comes. The mouse or rat shows itself, and in a moment again, without one movement of his wings and without one tremor of the air, he "drops" upon his prey. There is hardly a struggle or a cry; his long, strong, sharp talons—and no bird of his size has such long, such strong, and such sharp talons—have met in the vitals of his victim, and he flies back with it, grasped tightly in them, to his coign of vantage; after a fitting interval of meditation, bolts or tries to bolt it whole, and then patiently waits for another rustle below. From such a retreat, well stored with grain and well garrisoned with rats and mice, he rarely, except for purposes of getting water, needs to stir. But he is almost equally at home in the hollow of some immemorial oak or ash or elm, where he or his forefathers have dozed for decades or for centuries, or in the

"ivy-mantled tower," where he may "mope" to his heart's content,

"And to the moon complain
Of such as, wandering near his sacred bower,
Molest his ancient, solitary reign."

Or as Tennyson, always true to Nature in his mention of birds, puts it—

"Alone and warming his five wits,
The white owl in the belfry sits."

I have found the white owl "at home" in many such belfries, where he has often allowed me to handle him, rather than shake off his drowsiness and trust himself to the light of day. I have often wondered what a bird with so exquisitely elaborated and sensitive an organ of hearing as he has, can do, when the Sunday-morning bells ring out, with all their reverberations, within a few feet of him. Can he, by closing the *operculum* or flap of skin with which Nature has supplied him, sufficiently deaden the ding-dong bell? Or has he learned, as the result of long-transmitted experiences, that the agony, though sharp, is short? Or, like the more intelligent dog—who often knows that he must put on his best manners when Sunday comes—does he realise that, on each returning seventh day, the

belfry is no resting-place for him and his? I throw out these suggestions merely for what they may be worth.

When found at home, he moves his head slowly from side to side, with an air of ineffable gravity. Burleigh's nod was nothing to it. Should he be of a more combative disposition, he utters a prolonged hiss, or snaps loudly with his beak, and flings himself on his back, with claws drawn up, ready to fasten them in the hand of his "interviewer," or in the thick leather glove with which, if prudent, he will have enveloped it. When he has planted them there, he has done his little best, and submits with an almost Christian resignation to his fate, and straightway falls fast asleep in your hand. Now is the time to examine the marvellous mechanism of the ear, which is entirely hidden from view by the feathers which encompass it. It will take you long to find; but blow the feathers apart, just beyond the outermost circle of those which gird in the eye, and you will find that your fingers have been close to it all the time. You will find a large square orifice, many times as large in proportion as the human ear, with a flap of skin guarding the entrance, and a ring of little downy feathers gently curving inwards, closely set, and thus, doubtless, serving to

carry the most delicate pulsations of sound to the large and highly developed brain. The blowing may have slightly disturbed his equanimity, and he may, perhaps, have half opened one eye; but the moment it stops, you will find that, like the famous fat boy in *Pickwick*, he is "fast asleep again."

When his home is in a tree with a large hollow in it, you will often find that at the bottom of the hole is a soft conglomerate mass, perhaps half a bushel in quantity, of what were once neat oblong balls or pellets containing the indigestible portions of his food—the fur and bones and feathers, that is, of the animals which he has swallowed. These a wonderful provision of Nature—as in the case of a few other birds, like the kestrel and the kingfisher, which bolt their food whole—enables him to disgorge, with violent and repeated efforts, from his throat; and, when examined, they give incontestable proof, which even a game-preserve or gamekeeper cannot fail to understand, of his great services to man and of his complete innocence of the sins, the destruction of young partridges and pheasants, which have been laid to his charge. These pellets are found in their more perfect oval shape on the branches of the tree in which the female is nesting, or on the ground round it, as well

as on the branches of the adjoining tree in which her faithful mate keeps watch and ward. In this small, soft, damp concrete of fur and bones I have, sometimes, found imbedded large numbers of the hard wing-cases of beetles or of cockchafers, a species of prey which few would have suspected the white owl of much affecting. The Germans are great statisticians, and a German naturalist, Dr Altum,* has carefully analysed a large number of owl pellets. In 706 pellets of the barn owl he found the remains of 2525 rats, mice, shrews, bats, and voles, while there were fragments of only twenty-two small birds, and those chiefly sparrows; and the results were similar in the case of the other species of the owl. A dog, it is said, cannot remain in good health without bones; and the bones and fur of rats and mice, however indigestible themselves, seem a necessary aid to the digestive process in an owl. Feed a tame white owl on flesh from which these have been removed, and he will soon pine away and die.

The method in which a tame white owl—and if a tame, then probably also a wild one—disposes of a mouse which he has caught, is curious. He holds it, for a minute or two, by its middle, then, by a quick

* Quoted by Yarrell, *British Birds*, vol. i.

jerk of the head, throws it into the air, and catches it by its head. A second jerk sends it, head foremost, down his throat, with the exception of the tail, which remains hanging out for another minute or two of appropriate contemplation, when, on a third jerk, it disappears.

Another peculiarity of the barn owl may be mentioned here. Alone, I believe, among birds, she sometimes lays her eggs not continuously, day by day, but at considerable intervals of time. At first, it may be, she lays two eggs, on which she will sit for a week or so; then, two more; and then, when she has hatched the first two, perhaps, another three. So that you may find fresh eggs, hard seated eggs, and young birds, fairly grown, in the same nest. What is the reason of this peculiarity—a peculiarity almost as strange as that of the cuckoo, which by laying its eggs in another bird's nest, and leaving them to be hatched and reared by the foster-parent, has attracted universal attention, and seems to make a real breach in the continuity of Nature? Is it that by leaving the later eggs to be hatched, in part at least, by the warmth of the young birds, she has more leisure, by an all-night's absence, to satisfy the cravings of her voracious brood? The owlets, thickly covered

with the softest white down, and looking like so many puff-balls with brilliant dark eyes inserted in them, remain in the nest for many weeks, and are the unceasing care of the parent birds. A mother often loves best those of her children who are most undutiful, who give her most trouble and anxiety. Most young birds begin to shift for themselves within a week or two of their birth, and family life ceases altogether a week or two later again, except in the case of a few birds, like the titmouse or the magpie, which enjoy or endure the pleasurable pains of a family till the next spring comes round. Some few birds, like the young partridge, the young peewit, and the young wild-duck, begin to "kick over the traces" as soon as they are born. They run off, as the saying is, with the egg-shell on their backs. They rush about over the grass or the water, pick up grubs or gnats, and squat down into their smallest, or scuttle away into the nearest place of refuge at the first note of alarm given by the ever anxious mother. Young owls, on the contrary, which I have left in the nest, newly born, at Bingham's Melcombe, at Easter, I have found still in the nest and unable or unwilling to fly, when I have returned there, after a summer term at Harrow, nine or ten weeks later. If it be true that



BROWN OR TAWNY OWL. (*See page 55.*)



BARN OWLS.

From a Drawing by G. E. Lodge.

[To face p. 12

the love of a mother is generally proportioned to the trouble she has taken in rearing her children, how great must be the affection—the *στοργή*, as the Greeks called it—of the barn owl for her brood, and how vast the quantity of rats or mice which she must have carried, during those long weeks, to them!

Waterton, a close observer of bird life, says in his charming *Essays*, that a pair of barn owls which he watched, would bring a mouse to their nest every ten or fifteen minutes, and that in sixteen months they deposited over a bushel of pellets in the old gateway which they inhabited; while Gilbert White, the prince of all observers, whose letters will be a joy for ever to the naturalist—ever old and ever new—writes thus of the habits of the barn owl, which he carefully watched:

We have had, ever since I can remember, a pair of white owls that constantly breed under the eaves of this church. As I have paid good attention to the manner of life of these birds during their season of breeding, which lasts the summer through, the following remarks may not, perhaps, be unacceptable. About an hour before sunset (for then the mice begin to run) they sally forth in quest of prey, and hunt all round the hedges of meadows and small enclosures for them, which seem to be their only food. In this irregular country we can

stand on an eminence and see them beat the fields over like a setting-dog, often dropping down in the grass or corn. I have minuted these birds with my watch for an hour together, and have found that they return to their nest, the one or other of them, about once in five minutes, reflecting at the same time on the adroitness that every animal is possessed of as far as regards the well-being of itself and offspring. But a piece of address which they show when they return loaded should not, I think, be passed over in silence. As they take their prey with their claws, so they carry it with their claws to their nest: but as the feet are necessary in their ascent under the tiles, they constantly perch first on the roof of the chancel, and shift the mouse from their claws to their bill, that the feet may be at liberty to take hold of the plate on the wall as they are rising under the eaves.*

How simple is this record, how fresh, how redolent of the countryside, how instinct with that nameless charm which defies analysis, but which has made the name of Gilbert White to be a name of honour and of love with all the English-speaking peoples, and has made, and will, doubtless, continue to make, his little Hampshire village of Selborne, with its Wakes, its Plestor, its beech-crowned

* White's *Selborne*, letter liii.

Hanger, its Wolmer Pond and its Wolmer Forest—above all, the simple tombstone with the letters “G. W.” inscribed upon it—to be a place of pilgrimage, aye, of almost religious pilgrimage to all lovers of Nature for ever!

The eggs of the owl tribe, like those of the pigeon, are always white; but while no pigeon ever lays more than two, the owl lays from four to six eggs; and while the eggs of the pigeon are bright and glossy, those of the owl are a dull, chalky white, so rough in texture that an experienced bird's-nester can tell by feeling alone, before he sees them, the nature of the prize he has reached at the bottom of a hole.

The names of animals which have a distinctive cry are almost always onomatopœic; that is to say, they imitate more or less successfully the cry. And the cries of the owl, in its various species, are so strange, and, heard as they generally are at dead of night, they take such strong hold of the imagination, that one might be sure beforehand that the bird would receive, among various peoples, many apt or sonorous names. Such names, to take only a few from the vocabularies of widely scattered nations, without distinguishing the species, are the σκῶψ, the γλαύξ, the νυκτικόραξ (night-raven) of the Greeks;

the *strix*, the *bubo*, the *ulula* of the Romans; the *kô*s, the *kippôz*, the *yamshooph* of the Hebrews; the *hibou* of the French; the *hornugle* or *storugle* of the Danes, the Swedes, and the Norwegians; the *bufo* or *mofo* of the Portuguese; the *allocco* of the Italians; and, best perhaps of all, the *bu-ru-ru* of the Arabs.

The white owl screeches, snaps, snorts, snores, squawks, hisses; but it is now, I think, established that he never hoots. He utters his piercing shrieks chiefly when he is on the wing in the gloaming. The other sounds proceed generally, I believe, from the young brood of different ages while they are still in the nest, or are perching on the branches hard by, and when, in the owl-light, they are about to make some of their earliest essays at flight. Little wonder is it that country folk, hearing in the dusk this uncanny medley of strange noises proceeding from an ivied tower or a primeval oak or beech, should hear them with something akin to awe, and should regard the appearance and the cry of the bird from which it comes—as it has more or less, at all times and places, and in every species of literature, been regarded—as the harbinger of calamity, of disease, and of death.

The interest attaching to the actual habits of

the owl, as we know him now, is not lessened, it is enhanced, by knowing a little of what man has thought about him in former times and how he has treated him.

“Out on ye owls,” says the usurping murderer, King Richard the Third, to the messengers who, one after another, like the messengers to Job, bring him in ever fresh tidings of deserved danger, desertion, and disaster—

“Out on ye owls, nothing but songs of death.”

The Hebrew prophet pictures, with patriotic agony, his native city Jerusalem, with patriotic pride, her oppressor Babylon, given over to be inhabited—as, indeed, it still is, and as places like Jericho, Petra, Baalbek, Palmyra are—by owls and by what he regards as their proper associates :

Their houses shall be full of doleful creatures ; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there . . . the owl also and the raven shall dwell in it . . . and it shall be an habitation of dragons, and a court for owls . . . and the satyr shall cry to his fellow ; the screech owl also shall rest there, and find for herself a place of rest. There shall the great owl make her nest, and lay, and hatch, and gather under her shadow : there shall the vultures also be gathered, every one with her mate.*

* Isaiah xiii. 21 and xxxiv. 11-15.

When Herod Agrippa entered the Theatre at Cæsaræa clad, as the Jewish historian Josephus puts it, in a robe of silver tissue, on which the sun shone down with all his radiance, it was an owl which suddenly perched upon a rope above his head and warned him of his coming end—the end which had befallen the Syrian conqueror, Antiochus Epiphanes, the Roman Sulla, and his own ancestor Herod the Great, and which was to befall, in later times, that most unlovable of kings, Philip II. of Spain—the most terrible of all deaths, that of being devoured alive by worms, “the tyrant’s death.”

And in a region still more remote, the plains of the Euphrates and the Tigris, when the Roman army was about to give battle at Carrhæ, an owl appeared within its ranks, and warned them of what was to prove one of the greatest blows ever inflicted upon Roman imperial pride, the death and mutilation of Crassus, richest of mortal men, the annihilation of the Roman army by a horde of Parthians, and above all, the loss of the Roman eagles, which were to remain in the hands of the barbarians, till, in the world-peace which accompanied the reign of Augustus, they voluntarily restored them to their proper owners.

The owl fares ill, too, in Classical countries and throughout most of classical literature. Athens, indeed, was an exception, for the "little passerine owl," which is much more lively and active in his motions than others of his species, and was so common there that "owls to Athens" became as proverbial an expression as our "coals to Newcastle," was regarded, possibly because of its flashing "glaucous" eyes, like those which were attributed to the goddess, as the sacred bird of Athena—

"Athena's solemn snapping fowls"

—and its figure was stamped on the silver coins of the country, which were called, for that reason, "owls of Laurium." More than this, the goddess herself is believed to have been sometimes represented with an owl's head, the true meaning, some have surmised, of the famous Homeric epithet for her—*γλαυκῶπις* (*glaucopis*).

But if Athens was an exception to the general prejudices about the owl, it was only an exception which proved the rule. "Loathsome," "moping," "unclean," "ill-omened"—such are the stock epithets which are applied to it. It was an owl, as Virgil sings, that, perching upon the housetop at Carthage, predicted the desertion, the desolation,

the death of Dido. It was an owl that, amongst other portents, predicted the death of Julius Cæsar.

“And yesterday the bird of night did sit,
Even at noonday, upon the market-place,
Hooting and shrieking.”

It was into the form of an owl, when the day of destiny had come, that the Fury, sent by Juno, transformed herself, and by flitting with shrieks before the face, and by flapping with her wings upon the shield, of the ill-fated Turnus, paralysed him with terror, just as he was about to enter on his final conflict with Æneas, for the plighted hand of Lavinia.

No incantation in mediæval times was deemed likely to be successful, unless the “boding owl” shrieked assent. The “owlet’s wing” was as potent an ingredient as the blind worm’s sting, or the nose of Turk or Tartar’s lips, or the liver of blaspheming Jew, in the hell-broth of the witches’ caldron on the “blasted” Forres Heath. And when the deed of darkness was all but perpetrated, in Macbeth’s castle, upon the sleeping Duncan,

“It was the owl that shrieked ; a fatal bellman
Which gives the stern’st good-night.”

Once more, when that “ill-digest, deformed

lump," as Shakespeare calls him, crook-backed Richard of Gloucester, was about to stab, in his prison cell, the poor old dethroned father, as he had already stabbed, in the field, his stripling son, the ill-fated king turned fiercely upon the murderer, like the aged Priam upon Neoptolemus, and bursting into prophecy, in the light of coming death, warned him that the evil omens which had ushered him into the world, would accompany him to the end.

"The owl shrieked at thy birth—an evil sign ;
The night-crow cried, aboding luckless time ;
Dogs howled, and hideous tempests shook down trees."

Perhaps the peculiar shape of the white owl's face—heart-shaped when he is awake, elongated and thinner when he is asleep, and only becoming round, like other owls, after he is dead—marked him out for special suspicion and dislike. He perished almost as much for his supposed virtues as for his supposed vices. Different parts of his body were believed to possess different magical powers ; and, strangely enough, the very same organ was supposed to possess different powers at different times. His heart, if carried into battle, acted as a charm, inspiring valour and averting danger ; while, if laid on the left breast of a sleeping woman, it

caused her to divulge her secrets. To this day, it is probable that the white owl owes its safety, in some parts of England, to the belief that it has something supernatural about it. Only last year, in the little village of Thurlestone, in South Devon, where owls are common and are carefully protected in both barn and belfry, the rector, the Rev. Frank Coope, an old pupil of my own, was explaining to his Sunday-school children the clauses of the *Te Deum*, when it occurred to him to ask, "What are Cherubim?" The answer promptly came back, "White owls, sir," and revealed a belief among his parishioners of which he might otherwise have remained ignorant. "What are Seraphim, then?" "Brown owls, sir." "What do you mean by 'To Thee Cherubim and Seraphim continually do cry?'" "It means that the white owls are always screeching, and the brown owls always hooting before God." The belief is not confined to Thurlestone, or to the present day; for a book of *Sporting Anecdotes*, published early in the last century, and still preserved at Horsmonden Rectory, Kent, contains a chapter entitled "Cherubim shooting." Two Cockney sportsmen have succeeded in bringing down a white owl, a bird they had never seen before. It throws itself against a bank, and draw-



CHERUBIM SHOOTING.

From a Print in "Sporting Anecdotes," 1804.



ing up its claws, as its manner is, and contracting its body into the smallest possible dimensions, and spreading its large wings, seems, like the mysterious symbolical figure, once familiar in Egyptian and Jewish tabernacles or temples, and still to be seen in many of our churches, to be "all eyes and wings." Little wonder that one of the would-be sportsmen fled away with uplifted hands and hair on end, affrighted at the act of sacrilege he had committed, while his companion cried out, "Ah, poor creature, Heaven forgive him, he has shot a Cherubim." *

The magnificent Snowy owl, is a very rare visitant to England. Two specimens, however, have been seen in Dorset, in recent times. One of them I was lucky enough myself, some thirty years ago, to flush in the middle of winter, in Puddletown Heath. It settled again about two hundred yards off, and I was able to put it up repeatedly, getting, each time, quite near to the bird in all its majesty. The other was seen—I wish I could add that it had not been killed—at Langton near Blandford. But the proper habitat of the Snowy owl is the eternal snows of the north, where it is believed to possess peculiar powers of prophecy. In the most solemn assemblies

* *Sporting Anecdotes, Original and Select*, by an Amateur Sportsman. Albion Press, 1804.

of the North-American Indians it is said that the priest or medicine-man conceals his own head and shoulders within its head and skin. It is a fitting garb for the seer to whose prophetic insight the stirring present is not more visible than the remote past and the dim and distant future. This is the bird which, as the Red Indian believes, in his sorrowful cry, uttered, night after night, from the deep fir forest, of "Koo Koo Skoos," "Oh I am sorry, Oh I am sorry," laments the Golden age, when men and animals understood one another better than they do now, while, as yet, they lived in amity, and the Great Spirit had not been driven by their differences beyond the seas, never to return, till they had become friends again.* That there was such a time, while mythologies were still in the making, when men and animals were not divided from each other by any such broad line of demarcation, as in spite of the revolution and revelation made by Darwin is supposed by many people to divide them still, the study of Comparative Religion and all other lines of investigation seem to show. And if so, it has been well remarked that

* Quoted by Rev. M. G. Walker in his "Natural History of the Ancients," from Adam's *Field and Forest Rambles in New Brunswick*, p. 55.

St Francis of Assisi, when he spoke of "his brother the wolf and his dear sister the sheep," was using language which would have been more intelligible, and might have expressed better the feelings of his remotest progenitors, than they did of his own contemporaries.

In Morocco, the Jews and Arabs, who hate and differ from each other in almost every other respect, agree in their belief about the owl. They believe that the owl is the bird of Satan, and that his shriek causes the death of infants—a catastrophe which they strive to avert by reiterated curses, or by copious libations of water in the courts of their houses.* And Ovid, who, in his *Fasti*, describes the leading characteristics of the owl in two lines as well as they ever have been described—

"Grande caput ; stantes oculi ; rostra apta rapinæ ;
Canities pennis, unguibus hamus adest "

—goes on to tell us, in curious agreement with the superstitions of Morocco, how, in ancient times at Rome, it was believed that witches were able, by their magic arts, to transform themselves into screech owls, or screech owls to transform themselves into witches, and that, entering the window of the

* Dresser's *Birds of Europe*, vol. v.

nursery in which young infants were asleep, they sucked their life-blood, as they lay in their cradles. Little wonder that, with such sins laid to its charge, an unlucky owl which blundered into a Roman house was nailed, alive and struggling, to the house door, to avert the evil that it would have wrought.

We may dismiss with a sigh or smile the record of such acts of stupid cruelty, hoping, perhaps, that like other things which are said to have happened so long ago, they may not, after all, be true. But is the conduct of the game-preserve of the present day one whit less stupid or less cruel, when, in spite of our better knowledge, he allows his gamekeeper to set a trap upon a pole for anything and everything that he is pleased to call "winged vermin," leaving often the unfortunate owl—whose characteristic it is, while in pursuit of his prey, to perch upon any solitary post of vantage that presents itself—to perish there by inches, with head downwards, in unutterable agonies, and then pays him so much per head for the ghastly trophies of his murderous skill, nailed, if not, as the Romans did, to the door of his house, at least to an adjoining gibbet? The curious use made, on one occasion, of one of these barbarous trophies—but little thanks to the

murderer for it—may be mentioned here. A swallow fashioned her clay and “straw-built” nest, laid her eggs, and hatched her young, on the skeleton, and between the wings, of a luckless barn owl, which had been nailed to a rafter, as if in cruel mockery, in its own barn.

Country landowners and their tenants, in old times, were, it would seem, more alive than their successors of the present day, alike to their own interests and the beauties of Nature, when, in building those picturesque old thatched barns which are still one of the glories of the more rural parts of England, they made a practice of leaving above the door, and below the thatch, an “owl-window” or hole to allow free ingress and egress to the winged friend of the farmer. Such a barn, with its “owl-window,” is still to be seen at Dewlish, two miles from Bingham’s Melcombe.

Curiously enough, the owl is as unpopular amongst birds, as he is the victim of prejudice, ignorance, superstition, cruelty amongst men. He seems to be under a ban. “There is some sad secret,” well says Mr Evans in his volume on *The Songs of Birds*, “which we do not know, which no bird has yet divulged to us, and which seems to have made him an outcast from the society of

birds of the day. He is branded with perpetual infamy."

"Not a bird of the forest e'er mates with him,
All mock him outright by day,
But at night, when the woods grow still and dim,
The boldest will shrink away."*

Should he be disturbed, by any accident, from his resting-place by day, he is straightway mobbed by a motley crowd of clamorous birds—rooks, starlings, missel thrushes, song-thrushes, blackbirds. Chaffinches too come bustling up with crests erected and emphatic "pink, pink," and even Tennyson's "tits, wrens, and all winged nothings," emboldened by numbers, join in the "hullabulloo" of disapproval and protest. The owl sits stock still amongst them; his eyes dazed by the light; his ears deafened by their cries; his feelings outraged, we may well believe, by their insults. "Hit him hard; he has no friends," seems to be their maxim. He flies blundering from tree to tree, unable to shake off his persecutors, who do not cease to molest him, till he can find a hollow tree to hide himself from their view, or till the shades of evening make him once more at home.

* Quoted by H. G. Bull in *Notes on the Birds of Herefordshire*, p. 110.

Folk-lore is the débris of paganism, often colouring or coloured in its turn, by early Christian legends or traditions. The folk-lore connected with four-footed animals, is, unfortunately, fast dying out in civilised and Christian countries ; but it is otherwise, for pretty obvious reasons, with birds, in whose case, in out-of-the-way districts at least, it is still hale and vigorous. Legends still cluster thick round all the more favourite or remarkable birds ; the cuckoo, the woodpecker, the magpie, the raven, the nightingale, the robin, the wren. And folk-lore has, of course, not least to say about the owl. How does it explain the outcast condition of the owl, and does it throw any light on the well-known but mysterious line of Shakespeare, which tells us that "the owl is said to have been the baker's daughter?" The birds were, once upon a time, so runs the legend, without fire. The wren, tiniest of them all, volunteered to bring it down from heaven, when all the rest demurred. She succeeded in her errand, but all her feathers were scorched off her body. The grateful birds contributed, each one of them, a feather of its own to make up the loss. The owl alone refused ; he could not spare one, he was so cold in winter. He was condemned, in consequence, to be always cold and always solitary.

Hence his cry, "whoo, whoo," which implies that he is cold. Hence his shivering on St Agnes Eve, "in spite of all his feathers." Hence his isolation by day, and his solitary flights by night, and the persecution he suffers, if his enemies ever catch sight of him in daylight. And what about the "baker's daughter?" Christ, as the legend goes, feeling an hungered one day, went into a baker's shop to beg for a bit of bread. The baker was ready enough to give it, but his daughter demurred; and when her father, in spite of her protests, put the dough into the oven and it began to swell, she murmured again at the waste, with a "whoo, whoo, whoo," a sound which suggested to the Saviour that she should be turned into the bird whose cry her protest most resembled, lest she should encourage others by her example, to refuse bread to the hungry or clothes to the naked!

One more proof, if such be needed, may be given here that the barn owl, if other birds are enemies to him, is no enemy to them. What was once thought to be the most damning evidence against him, turns out, on further investigation, to be the clearest testimony in his behalf. It has long been known that he sometimes selects for his habitation one of those picturesque dovecots which are

among the chief charms of the old-world manor houses of England; and no meaner an observer than Gilbert White was inclined to put down the wholesale destruction of the young pigeons within it to this self-invited guest. He occupied, so it was thought, one niche in the *columbarium*, that he might feed freely on the young occupants of the adjoining niches! But another observer of Nature, Waterton, who will always be remembered with gratitude by lovers of birds, for the protection which, on the principle, the only true principle, of "live and let live," and of so preserving the balance of Nature, he gave on his own estate to those interesting and beautiful birds of prey, such as hawks and magpies, which were persecuted elsewhere, showed by careful observation of his dovecote, which a pair of barn owls had adopted as their own, that "the saddle had been laid on the wrong horse." From the moment that he was able to exclude rats from his dovecote, there was no further massacre of the innocents; and, thenceforward, both barn owls and pigeons lived, and laid their eggs, and hatched and reared their young, as members of one happy family. Pigeons do *not* mob the barn owl who lives amongst them, because they know him well. Other birds *do* mob him, because, being a

bird of night and quite unlike themselves, they hardly know him at all. A boy at school who is quite unlike other boys, who takes a line of his own, and has higher interests than those of athletics, is too often likely to be dubbed as "mad," and to have a bad time of it among his companions ; and birds, in this particular, are not much ahead of boys.

It is a little hard upon a bird so aloof and inoffensive as the owl, so often molested by other birds, and so seldom molesting them in return, that it should have been selected by Tennyson as a type of the critics whom he affected to despise, and yet whom he too often allowed to make his life a burden to him :

" While I live, the owls ;
When I die, the GHOULS."

From the arch enemy of the rat, I pass, once more, to the rats themselves, that I may relate a curious experience of my own, of a few years ago, near my present home. One advantage of the cycle of the day to those who care for Nature, as well as for the extent of ground which they can cover, is the way in which it enables its rider to steal quietly on the wild creatures which he loves to watch. He may pass, noticing but quite unnoticed, and pause as he passes, within a few feet of the

hare, the rabbit, or the weasel, of a covey of partridges, of a flock of wood-pigeons, of a family of magpies, and watch them at their ease and his own. I was tricycling homeward, one evening, from the village of Puddletown, near Dorchester, when I saw passing slowly across the lane in front of me, down one steep bank and up another, a creature which at first completely puzzled me. It had long, shaggy, grizzled hair, and everything about it betokened extreme old age. Its long hair, it may well be, made it appear at the time to be bigger than it really was, and, for the moment, I thought it must be a species of pole-cat. I now believe it to have been a rat, but a Nestor among rats—a Nestor who had lived, like its prototype, through some three generations of its kind. I stopped my tricycle short, wondering what this strange creature could be. It was closely followed by an ordinary rat, and then, as though it were a second Pied Piper of Hamelin, by another and another, and yet another, sometimes singly, sometimes in twos or threes, and of all ages. I watched, for some time, the ragged regiment till there was a pause in it, and then, dismounting, gently stirred the tufts of long grass or clumps of nettles on the bank whence it came. They concealed, nearly every one of them, a rat or a mouse.

The bank was alive with them. With a stick, I could have killed a dozen or more. They were evidently migrating in a body, as it is known that they sometimes do, and as their congener, the lemming, does, on an enormous scale and under the most mysterious circumstances, in Norway, till they plunge into the sea by thousands, and so, of their own free motion, redress the balance of Nature.

But what was the explanation of their uncanny leader? I will hazard one for what it may be worth. Animals which live in communities have been observed, from Homer and the Cyclops' cave downwards, to have some sort of government amongst themselves. There is generally a bull that lords it over the herd, a ram that leads the flock, a stag that is the monarch of the glen. Bees have, of course, their queen; and it is not the lusty and the dashing, but the ragged-winged and, as Tennyson describes it,

"The many-wintered crow which leads the clanging
rookery home."

Why should rats who take up their abode, in some sort of community, in an old country house, or in a barn, or in a rickyard, and who have, as Frank Buckland has shown, very considerable intelligence

of their own, not also "have a king and officers of sorts"? Why should they not choose the oldest and most experienced of their number to be their "guide, philosopher, and friend"? I looked over the hedge into the field from which the procession had descended, and saw there a lot of cornstacks, with a threshing-engine, which, with all its paraphernalia, ready for use on the next morning, had apparently, just arrived. My theory is that the uncanny creature was a "king of the rats"; that the "eye of old experience" had taught him that the appearance of a threshing-engine was the prelude to disaster and massacre on the morrow, and that he gave, in right of his office, and, as in duty bound, the signal to be off. If, as is well known, rats instinctively quit, in a body, an unseaworthy vessel before she puts out on her last voyage; if they quit a crazy tenement which is about to fall from lapse of time, or which, like the house of Eugene Aram, is pre-doomed by the guilt long successfully buried within it, but now on his wedding morning to be revealed,* why should they not quit a rick, under the guidance of, perhaps, the one survivor, or of the oldest of the survivors, of a previous massacre, and make off for the next group of ricks? I say again I put this forward only as an

* See Bulwer Lytton's *Eugene Aram*, Book V., ch. i.

hypothesis, in the hope that some of those who read the story, and are interested in it, may be able, from their own experience, to throw some light upon it, whether by way of confirmation or of refutation.

The other owls of which I write, the long-eared, the short-eared, and the brown, may be dismissed more briefly; for much that I have said of the white owl may, with some modifications, be said of them. The long-eared or horned owl is, probably, the rarest of the three, and is seldom to be seen, and still more seldom to be heard, except by those who look or listen carefully for it. It is, in the strictest sense of the word, a "woodlander." It inhabits deep, dark fir woods, where the sound of the woodman's axe is rarely heard, and where, if unmolested, the same pair, or their descendants, will go on living from generation to generation. It is within my own knowledge that they have done so in one such lonely wood, on the edge of Knighton Heath, for nearly half a century. By day, the long-eared owl remains perched on a branch close to the bole of a Scotch fir or spruce, with its body tucked up so tightly against it that it looks exactly like a knot or excrescence on its surface. It is, therefore, rarely seen till it is dislodged from its favourite position by a sharp

tap with a stick at the base of the tree. But as it seldom flies, in its tumbling, sleepy fashion, more than some twenty or thirty yards away, and then pitches on the middle of a branch, you can often come on it again, and creep up so close to it that you can make out its distinguishing marks, its beautifully-mottled brown plumage, its ears or horns, which it can raise or depress at pleasure, and its eyes, which flash fire at you from their yellow irides. These eyes he fixes steadily on you. Fix your eyes on him in turn, and walk slowly round him, first to the right and then to the left, in a full half-circle, and he will follow you with his eyes, without moving his body, throughout. It is this peculiar habit of his, and of some of his allies, that has given birth, I fancy, to the Yankee or Indian legend, that if you go round and round an owl of the country very slowly, with your eyes fixed on him, he too will go round and round very slowly, with his eyes fixed on you, till his head—which, in any case, is rather loosely affixed to his shoulders—drops off his body!

No owl has much building talent. The horned owl lays her five or six white eggs, sometimes in an old squirrel's drey far out on the bough, sometimes in an old hawk's or crow's or magpie's nest, not

caring to do anything to repair or make them comfortable. A clump of high fir-trees at the edge of a large expanse of down or heath, like Mayor Pond, or Yellowham Wood, or Badbury Rings in Dorset, is a favourite resort. Its single call-note of "hook, hook" is seldom heard except in summer-time, and only when the evening is far advanced. But I remember well when, many years ago, I was climbing to a likely-looking nest in a big clump in the middle of the open Whitechurch Down, which contained at that very time—and oh! what a paradise of birds it was!—within its limited compass, the nests of two other birds of prey, a sparrow hawk and a carrion crow, the weird and varied cries which proceeded from an adjoining tree, and which, accompanied by the strangest and most distressful motions and grimaces, betrayed the anxious solicitude of the mother's heart. The nest contained five young owlets covered with brown or yellow down, with eyes which were already at their brightest, and horns which were just beginning to appear. One of them I managed to rear, and a very amusing and interesting pet he was. He would remain perched with his eyes closed, apparently in sleep, the greater part of the day, but with a tiny slit left open, from which he could see just as much as it behoved him to know ;

and when he opened them he did so with a serio-comic look of surprise and a "Why do you disturb me?" air, which remained upon them, till they closed in semi-sleep again.

The sound made by the horned owl, as by the eagle owl—of which he is a miniature—and by which each of them is best known, is not a note at all. It does not proceed from the throat, but is occasioned by a smart clicking of the bill, the movement of the mandibles being so rapid that it can hardly be seen, even when one is watching it narrowly. More interesting even than the sight of the old bird clinging close to the trunk of the tree, is what may, perchance, happen to you, when, your attention awakened by the number of pellets lying somewhere on the ground, you look up and catch sight of a whole family of half or even fully-fledged young long-eared owls, five or six in number, sitting demurely side by side, as they will do for weeks together, on a single branch, unable or unwilling to fly, and waiting patiently for the parent birds to bring them their food in the gloaming. A gamekeeper has been known to sweep them all away with a single discharge of his gun, and to boast of his achievement, as though he had done something great and good.

I have mentioned the eagle owl ; and as he is met with as an occasional straggler in this country, and as I have kept successive pairs of them in an aviary at Harrow for many years, I must add a word or two about him. He is the most magnificent, I think, not only of the owls, but of all birds. The female, as is the case with many birds of prey—notably the peregrine falcon and the sparrow-hawk—is a third larger than the male, and far surpasses him in every manly quality. She takes the lead throughout ; she is everywhere and everything ; he nowhere and nothing. Her talons have a terrible grip and strength. She has been known to kill a dog or a sheep, and to carry off a full-grown hare without much apparent trouble. When she is angered by the unceremonious approach of a visitor, she lowers her head almost to the ground, moves it slowly from side to side in a long sweep, snaps loudly with her bill, quivers from head to foot with half-suppressed rage, and raises her wings in a vast circle above her body, each “particular” feather “standing on end” erect and distinct, her eyes flashing fiercely the while, and turning from a yellow to a fiery red. But even when she is thus excited, she will allow you, if you go cautiously to work, to get your hand above and behind her head, and, almost burying it in the soft



EAGLE OWL.

From a Drawing by G. E. Lodge.

[To face p. 40.]

fluffy feathers of her neck, gently to scratch her poll.

Considunt iræ.

A considerable number of these splendid birds were, for many years, kept in a fit abode for them, the ancient keep of Arundel Castle, the whole of which was netted in for the purpose, and allowed them to be observed in almost a state of Nature. As you entered, and saw one and another of these truly regal birds sitting in each niche or window of the keep, in stately repose, you felt somewhat as the rude Gaul or as the envoy of Pyrrhus felt, when he entered the Roman Senate, that it was an assemblage, if not of gods, at least of kings. A clump of trees and of thick bushes in the centre of the keep gave them such shade as they required—the eagle owl is not so exclusively nocturnal in its habits as are most other owls, and will often take his prey by day—and the open space between it and the wall gave you ample room to observe the wide spread of their wings as they swept, in their eerie flight, noiselessly round and round. The finest of the whole assemblage was known by the strange name of "Lord Eldon." One of the daughters of the famous Lord Chancellor, entering, one day, the keep, in ignorance of what was there, and catching sight of the venerable bird sitting in its post of state, and

blinking its eyes with all the sleepy majesty of the aw, had exclaimed, "Dear me, how like papa!" The name, thenceforward, stuck to it; and, years afterwards, the butler, whose business it was to see after the eagle owls, and who was not a little proud of his charge, rushed up, in a state of pleased excitement and of domestic importance, into the Duke of Norfolk's study. "What is the matter?" said the Duke. "Please your Grace," was the reply, "Lord Eldon has laid an egg."

It was the eagle owl, doubtless, which was the "imperial" bird whose appearance, on rare occasions, in Rome, filled the Romans with terror, as portending calamity to the State at large, and of which Pliny the Elder,*—mixing fiction with fact, and imagination with observation, the former sometimes predominating—gives the following significant account: "The great-horned owl, when it appears, foretells nothing but evil, and if auspices which import the public weal are being taken at the time, is more to be dreaded than any other bird. It haunts waste places, nay, spots which are terrible and inaccessible. It is a portent of the night; and makes its presence known by no kind of song, but rather by sobs and moans. Accordingly, whenever it shows

* Pliny's *Natural History*, x., pp. 12-16.

itself in cities or at all by daylight, it prognosticates dire misfortunes. Should it perch upon a private house it is not necessarily of evil omen for the State. It flies, not, as do other birds, where-soever they list, but drifts along in uncertain sidelong fashion. On one occasion, it entered the shrine of the Capitol itself, and, accordingly, on the Nones of March of that year, the whole city had to undergo a solemn purification." He then proceeds to quote a certain Hylas, a high authority on auspices, who avers that the owl, unlike most other birds, "issues from the egg back foremost, inasmuch as one side of the egg is weighed down by the great size of its head, and so the lighter end, containing the back, is presented to the fostering warmth of the mother." "Crafty is the mode," he continues, and—here he is on the solid ground of observation and of fact—"in which the owl fights other birds. When surrounded by a great number of them, it flings itself on its back and striking out with beak and claws, contracts its body into its smallest and so protects itself on all sides. The hawk will help him, from a natural kinship of Nature, and share the combat with him." And he goes on to quote yet another authority, Nigidius, who avers that owls sleep for sixty days

in the winter—a considerable respite one might remark from their evil doings—and have nine different cries, a promising field, one might remark again, for the craft of the augur. So much for the great imperial owl and the terrors which it inspired even in imperial Rome!

The short-eared owl differs in many respects from the other owls of which I am writing. To begin with, he is a bird of passage, which, appearing along with the woodcock in the autumn and disappearing with him in the spring, and flushed as he often is, like the woodcock, in boggy ground and having the same kind of drifting zig-zag flight, is often known as the "woodcock owl." He is more partial in his distribution over the country than his fellows, being fairly common in the eastern counties in which he first alights from his long southward flight, but rare in the Midlands and the West. I have in my possession the skin of one which was killed many years ago, on Knighton Heath near Stafford, Dorset, and seven were flushed together two years running, last year and this, in a turnip field at Milborne, in the same county. But this was quite exceptional. His head is smaller, his eyes less prominent, his form more lissom than those of other owls. He haunts not the deep dark woods, but the bare bog or moor-

land, and his mate deposits her eggs, not in the snug hollow of a tree, or in a barn, or in the deserted drey of a squirrel, but in the open, on the bare ground, or sheltered, if sheltered at all, only by dead bracken or a tuft of overhanging heather. In a word, the short-eared owl is less of an owl than other owls. She is less nocturnal in her habits, and has been observed, not infrequently, as we shall see, beating the ground for her favourite food, the field vole, in the full glare of the sun.

Though she is called the "short-eared owl," her horns are so much shorter than those of her nearest relative, the long-eared owl, and she so seldom elevates them, that they are apt to escape notice altogether. In the shape of her head, she resembles a hawk almost as much as an owl, and hence is often called the hawk-owl. All other owls are strictly local in their habits, clinging, with touching fidelity, to the barn or belfry, to the immemorial oak or beech, to the fir plantation in which they first saw, or shrunk from, the light of day. They seldom wander, in their longest flight, more than a mile or two from it. The short-eared owl, on the contrary, is a vagrant by nature and by habit; here to-day and gone to-morrow. You never know

where to look for her, or when you will find her. She follows her prey—and well is it for man, as we shall see hereafter, that she does so—wherever it is most abundant. Folk-lore, which has so much to say about other species of the owl, is silent, or almost silent, about her. No poet has sung of her. The favourite epithets of the poets for the owl from the earliest times—"moping," "moody," "melancholy," "bird of darkness," "bird of death"—sit ill upon her. Gamekeepers, with few exceptions, know her not. Pole-traps, with all their gruesome paraphernalia, and their luxury of torture, are not for her or hers.

Nevertheless, she is a remarkable bird. Her geographical range is wide—wide almost as the raven. She is found over the whole of Europe, over the north of Asia and Africa, and over the whole of both Americas. Darwin noted her presence in the Galapagos, that remarkable group of islands on the Equator, which did so much, first, to set him in the path and then to lead him so many steps forward, in his momentous and epoch-making discoveries. She is found even in the Sandwich Islands, in the middle of the North Pacific.

Her disabilities are great. All owls are bad walkers, owing to the length and sharpness of their

claws. They can only move upon the ground by a series of awkward and, one would think, rather painful hops ; but, then, they rarely need to touch it at all, except when they pounce upon their prey. Their normal position is bolt upright upon a perch, with two of their claws pointing more or less backwards, and two more or less forwards. When they do alight upon a flat surface, they have to push a third toe towards the front, in order to keep their body tilted forwards and their delicate tail feathers off the ground ; for owls, it should be noted, are as careful of their exquisitely light and fluffy feathers, and spend as much time in preening them, as a girl, who is conscious of her beauty, does before a looking - glass, in dressing her hair. Not a feather is allowed to remain out of place, or soiled with earth or blood stains, so long as its possessor is in good health. The short-eared owl, on the contrary, very rarely perches upon a tree and can only by a special effort, if at all, sit quite upright. Her plumage therefore must require " double, double, toil and trouble," and she is fain, one would think, to relieve her state of " little ease " by an occasional flight by daytime.

On the other hand, she is bold and fierce to a degree, mobbing an intruder when she thinks

that her young are in danger, luring him onward, with all the skill of a partridge or a wild duck with her make-believe of a broken wing, and even more fearlessly than does the timid peewit, and, sometimes, attacking an animal much bigger than herself, as an anecdote told me by Lord Peel will show. He was walking, one evening, at Sandy, in the heather on the outskirts of a fir wood, in which there had been a shooting party earlier in the day. He heard the screaming of a hare—one of the most painful cries, as all humane sportsmen feel, in Nature—and turning round, he saw her coming towards him. Her screams redoubled as she drew nearer; and he then observed that three or four short-eared owls were pursuing her and darting at her head, which was stained with blood. Each time they swooped, the hare screamed afresh; but when she was only a few feet distant, the owls catching sight of their observer, made off, while the hare passing quite close to him, took refuge in the thicker fern growth, and pursuers and pursued were seen by him no more. “My impression was and is,” writes Lord Peel, “that the hare had been wounded by shot, and that the short-eared owls were attracted by her condition and

made the most of it. They had not, I think, caused her wounds."

One conspicuous service rendered by the short-eared owl to man must not be passed over. It is well known that, from time to time, for centuries past, various countries have been desolated by armies of destroying voles which disappeared at last almost as suddenly as they came. The vole (*arvicola agrestis*) is a little creature, about the size of a field mouse, but "with a short round muzzle, short ears which are almost lost in her fur, and a conspicuously short tail." Essex has been laid waste over and over again by them. The New Forest and the Forest of Dean have had their turn. Countries like Hungary, Galicia, Thessaly, have been over-run by them; and Mr Hudson, the distinguished naturalist of La Plata, has admirably described the mischief done by them, even in the Pampas; but it is the havoc wrought repeatedly in the Lowlands of Scotland which has attracted most attention. Whole plantations of young trees are destroyed; the young grasses are nibbled through or poisoned over hundreds of square miles of pasture; the sheep and lambs pine away and die. A friend in need is a friend indeed—and all the records from Holinshed downwards, tell us that the bane has

been always followed by the antidote; in other words, the plague of voles has, shortly afterwards, been followed by a sudden apparition of short-eared owls. They remain as long as the voles remain, and disappear when they disappear. More than this; they breed freely in the strange country, and, what is most astonishing of all, their fecundity is often increased—nay, quadrupled—by the abundant food with which the voles supply them. They rear two broods in a year instead of one, and many of the nests actually contain, not five or six, but ten or twelve eggs apiece. The great majority of the witnesses, summoned before the committee of experts who were appointed to investigate the subject, with so high an authority as Sir Herbert Maxwell as their chairman, and Mr Harting, the well-known ornithologist, as their secretary, attributed the severity of the plague to the wholesale destruction by gamekeepers of those beneficent animals and birds—weasels foremost among animals, and buzzards, kestrel hawks, and, above all, owls among birds—which feed upon mice and so tend to maintain the balance of Nature; while they were equally unanimous in considering that the most potent factor in the limitation of the mischief done was the advent of the short-eared owls, which dis-

covered the whereabouts of their enemies, nobody quite knew how, appeared, nobody quite knew when, and came from regions, nobody quite knew where.*

A letter which I have received from Mr Colles of Higher Broughton, Manchester, illustrates further some of the traits in the short-eared owl of which I have spoken. "You speak," he says, "of the occasional activity of this owl by day ; and I venture to give you an experience of my own in Scotland. You will remember that, a few years ago, certain parts of the country were infested with voles to such an extent, that the sheep would not eat the grass over thousands of acres of moorland. It was some two years after they had been at their worst, that my son and I were fishing in St Mary's Loch ; and, one day about noon, while I was crouching down between the high banks of the Meggett, to keep out of sight of the fish, a short-eared owl skimmed, over the top of the bank, directly to the place where I was ; and I can assure you that no exaggerated comic picture of an owl I had ever seen, affected me as did this one. Its eyes looked to me as large as

* See the Blue-Book of 1893 containing the Report of the Departmental Committee appointed to inquire into the Plague of Field Voles in Scotland.

saucers, and the bird seemed a perfect ogre. A few days later, we were fishing one of the tributaries of the Tweed near its source, and had to walk over a mile or more of almost flat moorland, where there was hardly a bush, much less a tree to be seen. Wherever there was rise enough in the ground to form a little bank, the soil was perfectly honeycombed with what appeared like miniature colonnades, or rather cloisters, and we caught frequent glimpses of the voles within, as they flitted along their galleries. When we were well into this dreary place, a couple of short-eared owls positively mobbed us, and as we walked along with our fishing-rods over our shoulders, they followed us till we reached a dry gully, where they became more than ever demonstrative, coming well within the points of our rods. We searched the gully to see if we could find the nest or the young birds, which we were sure must be close by; but, as fishing was our main object, we had to give up the quest. You will observe, that, on both occasions, the hour was between eleven and twelve o'clock, and the sun was shining brilliantly."

The cries of the different species of owls differ much from each other, but they are always weird, sonorous, solemn, and they have always been

regarded by the most diverse races and from the earliest times, as the harbingers of disaster or death. It is all the more worthy of remark, therefore, that, on one occasion, the cries of a pair of owls with their varying intonations, are said, when skilfully interpreted by a Magian priest who, like Solomon, was able to understand the language of birds, to have partially converted a typical Eastern tyrant from the error of his ways. Bahran, one of the Sassanid kings of Persia, who shrunk from no act of oppression towards his subjects, and was, therefore, regarded by them as a man of "right royal" disposition, was passing, one night, through some villages which he had depopulated. He was accompanied by a Magian priest who—thanks to the influence which his mysterious insight gave him—was able, sometimes, like the barber of the infamous Louis XI., and by methods, similar to his, appealing to superstitious feelings, to deter even his master from a deed of violence. The king was struck by the loud hooting of an owl in one ruined village, which was immediately answered by his fellow in another. "What is the owl saying?" he asked. "The male bird," replied the seer, "is making a proposal of marriage to the female." "And what does the female say in reply?" asked

the king. "I will marry you, she says, if you will give me the dowry which I ask." "And what is that?" said the king. "She asks him," replied the seer, "for twenty villages destroyed in the reign of our gracious king Bahran." "And what does he say to that?" asked Bahran. "Please, your Majesty, he says, that if your Majesty will only reign long enough, he will easily be able to give her a thousand ruined villages." The rapier-thrust did its work. It touched the conscience of the Persian, as the parable of the ewe lamb, and the solemn "Thou art the man" of Nathan, the Prophet, roused the sleeping conscience of the Jewish king. Conviction was followed by repentance; and repentance by restitution, and a somewhat amended life.

The brown or tawny owl is as widely dispersed over England as the white, but being somewhat more of a woodlander, and its plumage being more sombre and inconspicuous, is less seen than her congener—less seen, but much more heard; for while the white owl's shriek is pretty well confined to the early hours after dusk, the "most musical, most melancholy" "tu-who-o-o" of the brown owl is to be heard, when he is properly protected, throughout the live-long night. His eyes are dark,

round, and expressive ; his feathers finely barred and extraordinarily soft and fluffy ; yet they stand out nearly at right angles to his body, and so make it appear not merely larger, but much larger—perhaps twice as large—than it really is. It is difficult to believe that Keat's famous line,

“The owl for all his feathers was a' cold,”

can ever have been true of him. In his soft, silky, noiseless flight he stretches out his legs behind him, to serve, as Gilbert White remarked, as a balance to his heavy head. The female lays her five, almost perfectly round, eggs early in March in the deep hollow of a tree to which she sticks year after year. Her young are the queerest little balls of grey woolly down, and have been well compared to a “pair of Shetland worsted stockings rolled up, such as might have belonged to Tam o' Shanter.” They remain long in the nest or perched just outside it ; and when, at last, they have found their wings, they flit from tree to tree, constantly uttering their baby cry “tu-wheet, tu-wheet,” while their ever anxious mother, by way of keeping them together and assuring them, if they do not know it already,

that she is always there, utters, ever and anon, her loud refrain "tu-who-o-o."

"I would mock thy chaunt anew ;
 But I cannot mimick it ;
 Not a whit of thy tu-whoo,
 Thee to woo to thy tu-whit,
 Thee to woo to thy tu-whit,
 With a lengthen'd loud halloo,
 Tu-whoo, tu-whit, tu-whit, tu-whoo-o-o."

When the brown owl hoots, her neck swells out, as old Gilbert White remarked, to the size of a hen's egg ; and it is worth noting that, while most of the poets and almost all ordinary listeners regard her hoot as melancholy, and nothing but melancholy—just as the ancients regarded the song of the nightingale which, to our ears, seems exuberant and ravishing in its joy—yet there is a minority among the poets which, on occasion, takes the other view ; and it is a minority which deserves to be heard ; Shakespeare, Sir Walter Scott, and T. Nash among the number. What says Shakespeare?—

"When icicles hang by the wall
 And Dick the Shepherd blows his nail,
 And Tom bears logs into the hall
 And milk comes frozen home in pail ;
 When blood is nipt, and ways be foul,
 Then nightly sings the staring owl,
 Tu-whoo !
 Tu-whit ! tu-whoo ! a merry note !
 While greasy Joan doth keel the pot !"

What says Sir Walter Scott?—

“Of all the birds in bush or tree
Commend me to the owl ;
For he may best ensample be
To those the cup that troul.
For when the sun hath left the west,
He chooses the tree that he loves the best,
And he whoops out his song, and he laughs out his jest ;
Then, though hours be late and weather foul,
We'll drink to the health of the bonny, bonny owl.”

Once more, in his delightful poem on Spring, a poem which happens to have secured the first place in that best of all anthologies, the *Golden Treasury*, Nash couples the hoot of the owl with two at least of the most joyous sounds in Nature, the “jug-jug-jug of the nightingale,” and that of the wanderer “who tells his name to all the hills,” the cuckoo—

“Spring, the sweet spring, is the year's pleasant King :
Then blooms each thing, then maids dance in a ring,
Cold doth not sting, the pretty birds do sing,
 Cuckoo, jug-jug, pee-wee, to-witta-woo !
The fields breathe sweet, the daisies kiss our feet.
Young lovers meet, old wives a-sunning sit,
In every street these tunes our ears do greet
 Cuckoo, jug-jug, pee-wee, to-witta-woo !
Spring ; the sweet spring !”

It is not quite clear to me what bird is indicated by the mysterious sound “pee-wee.” Can it be the

pee-wit? which is never so vocal as in spring-time ; for, as Tennyson tells us—

“In the Spring, the wanton lapwing takes itself another crest.”

Or can it be the baby owl whose unformed plaint it resembles more closely? In this latter case, the owl will, in the opinion of the poet, take not merely First class, but Double First class honours, as the author of two of the most inspiriting and bewitching of sounds.*

Wordsworth, as remarked by Mr Lowell, agreed, on second thoughts, with the poets whom I have just quoted, and administered a severe rebuke to those who represented the note of the owl as melancholy. He practised what he preached, for

* One of my correspondents recognises in the sound “pee-wee” “the joyous note which is little more than a call heard from March to the end of May,” of the little tree-creeper ; another remarks that it is “exactly the sound made by the night-jar when on the wing.” I incline to think that the note of the tree-creeper is too minute to have been coupled by Nash with the loud ringing notes of the cuckoo, the nightingale, and the owl ; while the cry of the night-jar, the last of our summer birds of passage, is not to be heard till towards the end of May, too late, therefore, to be coupled with other sounds suggestive of early spring. I am inclined to think that “pee-wee” is the familiar note of the young of the brown owl, which is a very early breeder.

he altered one of his lines in "The Evening Walk" which had run—

"The tremulous sob of the complaining owl,"
into

"The sportive outcry of the mocking owl."

I am not sure that the rhythm was improved by the alteration, whatever we may think of the Natural history. Shelley, too, was on the side of the owl, and thought, at all events, while he was sitting happily by his wife, Mary, that the cry of the aziola, a "little downy owl" was—

"Such as, nor voice, nor lute, nor wind, nor bird
The soul ever stirred,
Unlike, and far sweeter than they all."

In any case, the brown owl makes one of the tamest, the most companionable, and the most solemnly amusing of pets. He has little of the inborn fierceness and suspicion of the other owls, and will very soon learn to perch quietly on your hand, or will even follow you about over a lawn or through a shrubbery. One young brown owl, which I brought up from the nest, and which belonged, I believe, to the same storied pair of parent owls, of whom I will speak presently, was very partial to music, would make its way, through an open window on the ground floor, into the room

in which a piano was being played, and would press closely against the instrument itself.

A curious incident connected with a wild brown owl, and communicated to me by Dr Jacob Cooper, Professor, for more than a third of a century, of the Greek language and literature in Rutgers College, New Brunswick, U.S.A., must find a place here. One morning, 27th November 1899, on going into his lecture-room, he found that a brown owl had somehow made her way into it, and had selected, as a perch, a huge framed photograph of Athens. It was an unlooked for illustration to both teacher and taught, of the proverbial expression "owls to Athens." With a special sense of propriety, too, she had chosen as her resting-place, a spot immediately over the Areopagus, the High Court of Athens, and its most aristocratic and venerable assembly, the assembly which had called forth the passionate pleadings of the Conservative poet, Æschylus, in one of the most impressive of his tragedies, if haply he might save it from destruction. For four whole hours, the "bird of wisdom" sat calmly on, while the Professor gave as many lectures to successive classes of his pupils, listening apparently to his instructions, and quite undisturbed by the noise made by his pupils as

they filed into and out of the room, or as they came up to say their Greek repetition, or to write on the blackboard immediately below her. And, just as Athena herself in the *Odyssey*, when she had assumed some disguise, in order that she might the better prompt or protect her favourite in his hour of need, suddenly flew away when her work was accomplished, and, by the act, revealed her true character to the astonished Ulysses,* so now, when the lectures were over, the bird of Athena, as though her mission was completed, vanished, like her prototype, through the window or up the chimney, leaving those who had watched her with the impression that they had witnessed, if not exactly a miracle, something that was next door to it; at all events, a sight such as they had never seen before, and they would, certainly, never see again. Before she disappeared, one of Dr Cooper's brother-Professors had time to take a photograph, which is in my possession, of the Bird of Pallas on her self-chosen throne; while another, a little later on, wrote an ode in her honour, which

* ὄρνις δ' ὥς ἀνοπαῖα διέπτατο.

The word ἀνοπαῖα, found only here, has been explained by the commentators to mean either a kind of "eagle," or "unnoticed" like a bird, or "up through the smokehole" in the middle of the roof, ἀν' ὀπαῖα.

is worth quoting here both for the affection it shows for the sacred bird, and also for the reverence for Greek culture and ideals, which it indicates as still lingering in a country which is apt to look forward rather than backward, and to care more for material wealth than for historical and spiritual associations.

“ O thou wise bird Athena made her own,
Did Instincts’ pulses beat within thy heart,
When, in this College hall, thy wings found rest,
Above the picture of her matchless throne ?

“ Or wast thou here at favouring moment thrown,
By breeze Favonian, to remind us lest
Our faith in old ideals, long professed
Be—like the Parthenon’s columns—overthrown ?

“ It matters not ; we take thee as thou art,
And house thee safe and warm in every heart,
For ne’er before was spectacle like this,
And now away the centuries are rolled
And in supremest splendour, as of old,
Up towers the temple-crowned Acropolis.”

While the female brown owl is sitting, the male bird usually keeps watch and ward on an adjoining tree, ready to do battle for her and hers against all comers. Many years ago, in the parish of Stafford, I was swarming up an elm-tree towards a large hole half-way up, which seemed likely to contain some treasure-trove. When I was some few

feet from the ground, I felt a heavy blow in the middle of my back, as though my companion had thrown a clod of hard earth at me. Turning round, I saw a brown owl fly back to his post in an adjoining tree from whence he had made his descent upon me. I continued my climb, and the same attack was delivered with even greater force, a second and a third time. In the hollow, which at last I reached, I found the wife sitting in as undisturbed repose above her young as the pigeon which preserved Mohammed, in the cave of Mount Hira, from his pursuers, and so made the Hegira or "Flight" to be, for all time, the era of chronology in the vast Mohammedan world ; and the husband, having, as I suppose, sufficiently delivered his soul by his three charges, and thinking that there was nothing further to be done, and that no harm was meant, now looked on as calmly as his wife.

You must be prepared, when you put your arm down into what you fancy to be an owl's hole, sometimes for a disappointment, sometimes for a smart rebuff. If a white owl happens to be "at home" there, and throwing herself on her back, plants her sharp claws firmly on your hand, you will never forget it ; while, as regards disappointment, one

incident will suffice. Gould, the author of so many splendid ornithological works, had, one day, climbed a tree in Australia to get at an owl's nest. "Yes, here he is," he cried to his friend below, "I can see his great eyes." He put his hand down boldly into the hole. It turned out—as often happens with such holes—to be full of water, and it was the reflection of his own eyes which he had seen therein.

The affection of the brown owl for its young, sometimes takes a truly tragical form. A brood of young owls, belonging, presumably, to the same two parents I have described above, had been taken by a dairyman who lived at Stafford, a field or two off, and were placed by him in a wire cage of wide mesh, which was hung up in the open barton. The parent birds soon discovered their brood, and, night after night, for weeks, brought them a supply of rats and mice which they deftly dropped through the bars of the cage. They could not make their own way in to their young, but, apparently, they cherished a fond hope that, some day, their young might be able to make their way out to them. But it was not to be; and the young birds were found, one morning, all dead in the cage without any external mark of violence, poisoned, as the dairyman and the inhabitants generally believed—and there is much, I think, on general

and special grounds, to be said for the belief,—by the parent birds who, finding that there was no other way in which they could free their darlings, with stern Roman resolve, gave them their freedom—thus. If this be so, the deep-seated feeling of which man imagines himself to be the exclusive possessor, that there are things worse even than death, treachery, ingratitude, cowardice, loss of freedom, loss of honour, religious apostasy, the feeling which bade Virginius save his little daughter, by a kindly stab with the butcher's knife, from slavery and shame; the feeling which bade the Numidian king, Massinissa, send as his last present to his beautiful bride, Sophonisba, when she was captured by the Roman Scipio, a cup of poison, with the message that “she was to see to it that she did nothing unworthy of the daughter of Hasdrubal and the wife of two Numidian kings,” is not confined to Roman or Numidian, or even to human nature as a whole. It extends, in its measure, by reason of the intensity of their parental affection, to the solemn and impassive-looking brown owl.

Owls, I believe, always pair for life, and their affection for one another is at least as marked as that for their young, as another touching anecdote

—connected, I believe, with this very same pair of birds—will prove. Some years later, I was tapping with my climbing-stick another elm-tree, in this same field, three hundred yards away, expecting to see a jackdaw hastily scuttle out of his hiding-place. Instead of that, a brown owl slowly poked its solemn-looking head out of the hole, and remained there looking down upon me with its big, mournful, dreamy eyes. I climbed the tree; it did not stir an inch. I lifted it gently out. Owls, as I have said, are always thin, not much else than feathers; but this one, from its weight, seemed to be feathers and nothing else at all. Its eyes slowly glazed; it turned over on its side, and died in my hand. I blew its fluffy feathers apart to see if I could unravel the mystery of its death. There was one tiny shot-hole in its skull, and, on inquiry, I found that some few weeks before, when an adjoining withy bed was being beaten for game, a boy, anxious, like others of his kind, to “kill something,” had fired at a big brown owl which had come lumbering out of an ivy-tree, its winter resting-place. The bird had quivered as he struck it, but had not fallen to the ground, and, escaping for the time, had evidently been dying, by inches, ever since, in the hollow in which I had found it; while her mate, faithful unto

death, had kept her supplied with mice and rats, several of which, quite recently killed, I found therein and also stored in the hedge below.

There is no rule about nidification without an exception, and I have found a brown owl's eggs in two places so unusual as to be worth mentioning—one in the fork of a Scotch fir in Sayer's Wood, a few feet from the ground, with hardly flat space enough to hold the round eggs themselves; the other, in a rabbit-hole in Knighton Wood, a few miles away. The food of the brown owl consists, in the main, of rats and mice and the larger insects; but gamekeepers wage an unrelenting war upon him, because, as they assert, he, once in a way, takes a rabbit, a leveret, or a young pheasant. It is difficult to prove a negative, especially in the case of a bird which captures its prey by night; but young pheasants, till they can perch and take fair care of themselves, are pretty safe beneath their mothers' or their foster-mothers' wings, and the evidence of the pellets goes quite the other way. In any case, the amount of good he does, even from a gamekeeper's narrow field of vision, immensely outweighs the harm. He falls only too easy a prey. His loud hoot constantly proclaims his presence, and a good imitation of it by the keeper's practised lips will

bring a brown owl from a remote part of the wood to a tree close at hand, where he can be picked off in the moonlight ; and if that fails, there is still the fatal pole-trap always ready.

Cruelty is often ingenious. Dignity is the natural butt of the vulgar, and the solemn appearance of the brown owl—"most potent, grave, and reverend seigneur" that he is—combined with his queer habits and the beliefs which have been held about him, has, in the course of centuries, given him many strange experiences and brought him into many awkward situations. There was a time when kites were common in England, and performed, when there were no drains, the useful office of scavengers in our great cities. The romantic sport of falconry was then at its best ; and when it was desired to bring the lumbering kite, the quarry of the falcon, within his view, it was the unlucky brown owl which was made to act as a lure. A fox's brush was tied to his legs ; he was made to fly as best he could, and his uncouth appearance, acting on the curiosity of the kite—a very inquisitive bird—soon brought him within measurable distance of his nobler foe. Italian bird-catchers, it is said, tether a brown owl to the ground, or fix him on a perch in an open space surrounded by bushes, and

the small birds that troop to mob him, find themselves caught by the bird-lime with which the bushes have been plentifully smeared.

But a worse and still more unworthy fate even than this used to befall the brown owl among our own forefathers. The belief, still prevalent in country districts, that an owl perching on the windows of a house or hooting near it, presages the death of an inmate, marked him out for special persecution at the time of family gatherings, and the so-called "duck hunt" was a common accompaniment of Christmastide. It was on this wise. An owl was lashed to the back of a duck, and duck and rider were launched upon a pond. The brown owl is not altogether a stranger to water, for, unlikely as it seems, he has been frequently seen, as the Java fishing owl habitually does, to pounce upon a fish and carry it to his young. But he is well frightened now. He digs his talons deep into the duck, as Europa clung the faster to the neck of the bull which carried her over the sea, when he plunged on purpose, more deeply into it, to strengthen her hold. The terrified duck dives. The more she dives, the more he grips; the more he grips, the more she dives. A tame owl which has dipped itself in water, as he loves to do, is a lamentable sight enough. His

fluffy feathers have lost all their fluffiness, and are glued to his side. His body, to all appearance, has shrunk to half its usual size. The water drips from his venerable countenance, his eyes stand out doubly, and his whole head seems little else but a pair of eyes and a beak. He shivers from head to foot. But a voluntary ducking in a basin is one thing; an involuntary and reiterated ducking, in a duck pond, by a duck which is tied fast to him, is quite another. Each time the duck rises to the surface, the owl looks more pitiable, and is welcomed only by the pitiless laughter of the onlookers, till death by drowning puts an end to his sufferings.*

A story related by H. L. Meyer, the well-known ornithologist, blends so closely the comic and the tragic elements, which are, as I have shown, so intermixed in the history of the owl, that I cannot help giving the drift of it here. The wife of the gardener had been, for some time, ill; and the master, passing one Sunday morning, by the cottage, noticed that its tenant and his two sons were dressed in black, and, to all appearance, plunged in the deepest melancholy. He offered his condolences, but the husband hastened to explain that it was not

* *My Feathered Friends*, by J. G. Wood, p. 143.

the death of his wife, it was only the announcement of it, that he was deploring. A brown owl had flown, some nights before, over his cottage, and had hooted repeatedly in the back-yard. The garments of the family had long been shabby, and now that the death of the wife was imminent, he had thought that suits of mourning, if made at once, would serve for the next Sunday services, as well as for the more sombre service that was so soon to follow. Die the mother did very soon afterwards, and what between the "boding owl" and the mourning garments which were already worn for her, she must have died, one would think, many times before her death. Meyer does not say so, but I cannot help thinking that that gardener must have been a Scotchman. The dour, the grim humour of the scene, the making the best of both worlds, the delicious economy, domestic and religious—above all, the "Sabbath blacks"—all mark the story as coming from the north of the Tweed. Is it not something of a piece with the Scotchman who, when he had been condemned to death, on the clearest evidence, for the murder of his wife, and who when his Counsel, liking his looks, came to visit him in his condemned cell, and telling him that there was no hope of a reprieve, nor did he deserve

it, asked him whether he could do anything further for him, replied: "Could you get me my Sabbath blacks to wear on the occasion?" "Yes," replied the Counsel; "but why on earth do you want them?" "It's just"—such was the rejoinder—"as a mark of respect for the departed."

Let me, before I conclude, lodge one more protest and make one more appeal against the pole-trap, which, though less common than it was, is still to be seen, a hideous appendage, in too many green rides in the game preserve, and on too many picturesque knolls amidst the heather. Anyone who has seen, as I have done, a bird which is so interesting from every point of view, which lends such a charm by its flight and note to the evening hours, which is so charged with natural affection for its young and its belongings, hanging from a pole-trap with pleading, reproachful eyes, and perishing in prolonged agony when, as so often happens, the keeper has not cared to go his rounds, must feel his indignation and his compassion deeply stirred within him. If he does not take the law into his own hands in obedience to a higher law—as, I confess, I have often done—and, wilfully guilty of a petty larceny, fling the instrument of torture into a place where it will not be found again,

he will, at least, feel that there is room for a new branch of the "Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Society," and be anxious to join an "Anti-Pole-trap League"—a league against a practice which involves the horrors of the operating-room of the vivisectionist, without any of the vivisectionist's excuse.*

But, appeals to humanity apart, let me also once more point out to all connected with the land that self-interest, if no higher motive, demands the instant abolition of the pole-trap. Large portions of England, my own neighbourhood amongst them, are at this moment being devastated by rats. No grain, no fruit is safe from them. They are an efficient agent in the spread of fever and other disease. The owl is their natural enemy, the check kindly placed by Nature—may we not say by God?—on their ravages. No owl can harbour within a mile or two of a pole-trap and live. Let it be anathema. Let the practice of making owl-screens, which suggest everything that is disagreeable in a room, and of wearing owl's wings and

* Since this passage and others condemning the pole-trap were first written, the pole-trap has been forbidden by law. I have thought it well, however, to retain them just as they were first written, in the text, for reasons which I have given in the preface.

owl's feathers which suggest so much that is thoughtless or selfish in a woman, a practice that was, no doubt, the origin and the justification, such as it was, of the advertisement seen, not long ago, by Mr Ward Fowler in a public-house :

"Wanted at once by a London Firm,
1000 owls,"

be anathema as well. The number of owls in the country has been terribly diminished. Let them be encouraged and protected in every way possible. Let the gamekeeper be rewarded as I have rewarded him myself, with some success, not for the owls that he destroys, but for the owls that he preserves. From the nature of the case, their number can never be very large. Let the owl be regarded and protected in England, as the stork is regarded and protected in Holland and other countries on the Continent. All parishes have once had—many parishes have still, and all may have again, if people will only be wise in time—one or more "owl trees," or owl barns, or owl belfries, which should be regarded, in the truest sense of the word, as "owl sanctuaries," where these fascinating and venerable benefactors of humanity may live inviolate from generation to generation.

CHAPTER II

THE RAVEN

PART I.—*Descriptive*

IN the last chapter, I expressed an opinion that there is no bird which is of so great interest in itself, and which it is so important and so imperative for us to preserve, as the various species of the owl. Owls apart, there is, I think, no class of birds which, in view of their high physical and mental development, of their powers of imitation, of their curiously alternating sociability and shyness, of their drolleries and their delicious aptitude, when domesticated, for fun and mischief, of their influence, through all the earlier centuries and earlier civilisations—an influence which has not quite gone by, even now and here—over the thoughts, the hopes and the fears of man, is equal in interest to

the crow or corvine tribe. That tribe, it should be remarked for the sake of the general reader, includes the crow itself, carrion and hooded, the rook, the magpie, the jackdaw, the jay, and, closely akin to them, if not actually of them, the Cornish chough. Each one of these birds has noteworthy characteristics of its own, and at the head of them all—as much, perhaps, above them, as their genus stands above all other genera—stands the subject of this and the two following chapters, the raven.

The raven (*Corvus corax*) is the biggest, the strongest, the boldest, the cleverest, the most wary, the most amusing, the most voracious—I am afraid I must also add, by far the rarest, and that in an ever-accelerating degree — of its kind. In the opinion of some of the most observant of hill-and-field naturalists, like Macgillivray and Waterton, and of some of the most recent and most strictly scientific of ornithologists, Professor Foster and Professor A. Newton, he takes his place, for reasons which they give, not only at the head of his own corvine family, but of all birds whatsoever. In other words, in their judgment—though it is impossible to record it without regret and without demur—he has dethroned the king of birds himself, the bird of Jupiter, the wielder of the thunderbolt, the symbol of imperial

majesty and power in ancient Rome, in modern France, in Germany, in Austria, in Russia, the bird which alone, it was believed, could face the sun with eye unflinching, the royal, the golden eagle, from his immemorial pride of place.

Glance for a moment at the history of the raven. His connection with man goes back to the most dim and distant traditions of the race. He plays a characteristic part, as a weather-wise bird—

“*Imbrium divina avis imminetum*”—

who did not always do what he ought to do, in the earliest records of the most sacred and venerable book in the world, the Bible.

‘Forthwith from out the ark a raven flies,
And after him, a surer messenger,
A dove.”

In a later record of the same book, he plays a part which is equally characteristic, in the career of the prophet Elijah—

“The ravens, with their horny beak,
Food to Elijah bringing ev’n and morn,
Tho’ rav’nous, taught to abstain from what they brought.”

He appears in the Chaldean version of the story of the Deluge, as well as in the Hebrew; while in the Koran, the Mussulman Bible, his achievements are

made to begin even earlier than in the Hebrew Bible ; for it was a raven who, when Cain, ignorant of the first principles of sanitary science, did not know how to dispose of the putrefying corpse of his murdered brother, Abel, which he had carried about, for a considerable time, upon his shoulders, was sent by God to show him and his descendants how it could be rendered innocuous. The bird killed a fellow raven in the murderer's presence, and forthwith, with beak and claws, dug a hole and buried it out of sight.

The raven was placed by the ancient Romans at the head of all the birds of omen, the *oscines* (*os cano*), as they were called : birds, that is, which, by their weird and startling cries, possessed the curious and enviable privilege of prescribing every detail of the public and social life—commanding this or forbidding that—of even so severely practical a people. He was again the sacred bird of the supreme Divinity of all the Teutonic and Scandinavian races, our own ancestors, of course, among them. He was the travelling companion, sometimes in person, always in effigy, of the “hardy Norseman,” wherever the winds or waves could carry his adventurous bark. More than any other bird—if we include along with him his nearest ally the crow, which is, in many languages, confused with him—he attracted the

attention of Shakespeare. It is worth noting that while the swan, which

"With arched neck
Between her white wings mantling proudly, rows
Her state with oary feet,"

so often and so exquisitely referred to by Milton, and the "wakeful nightingale," an equal favourite of his, for the most pathetic of all reasons, that, like himself, she

"Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid
Tunes her nocturnal note,"

have, each of them, to be content with being mentioned only a modest ten times by Shakespeare, the swallow and the owl may pride themselves on being referred to by him some twenty, the dove some thirty, the eagle some forty, while the crow or raven has the unique distinction of being mentioned over fifty times. In the rich and wide region of fable—of books, that is, some of which have been translated into more languages, ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, and have had, I suppose, a greater influence, alike as cause, picture, and effect, upon current morality than any other book except the Bible—the raven, as was to be expected from a bird of his marked character, takes a prominent place. In fable, the raven is among birds pretty much

what the fox is among animals, the most adroit, the most knowing, the most ubiquitous, the most unscrupulous among them all. In Pilpay as in Æsop, in Babrius as in Phædrus, in La Fontaine and L'Estrange as in Gay, he serves to point many a moral and adorn many a tale.

A bird whose literary history begins with Cain, with Noah, and with Elijah, and who gave his name to the Midianite chieftain Oreb ; whose every action and cry was observed and noted down, alike by the descendants of Romulus and the ancestors of Rolf the Ganger ; who occurs in every second play of Shakespeare ; who forms the subject of the most eery poem of Edgar Allan Poe, and enlivens the pages of the *Roderick Random* of Smollett, of the *Rookwood* of Ainsworth, of the *Barnaby Rudge* of Dickens, is a bird whose historical and literary pre-eminence is unapproached ; while, to the mind of the patriotic English naturalist, he carries with him also something of the pathetic interest which always attaches to a lost or losing cause, to a state of things, to a phase of thought or feeling, to a people or to an individual, whether man or beast, who is slowly passing away. The raven is passing away ; not yet, I am glad to say, from the world at large—he is much too widespread and much too wide

awake for that—nor even from the British Islands as a whole, but he is passing away from the whole of the interior districts of England, where, a generation or two ago, his solemn croak could so often be heard.

I will premise two things which apply not to this chapter only, but to the whole volume: first, I pretend to no strictly scientific knowledge of the subject. Science, nay, one single subdivision of one single branch of science nowadays, demands and deserves, if the study is to be fruitful of positive results, the devotion of a lifetime. But the observations and the studies—even if they should be somewhat “random and desultory”—of any one who has loved birds with a passionate love all his life, may have some little value of their own. They may rouse a general interest in the subject which purely scientific details may fail to do. They may add to the enjoyment of country life, and they may tend, as I have good reason to hope these essays in their earlier and more fugitive form, have already begun to do, towards the preservation of birds which, even if they are guilty of an occasional depredation on game or on the flock, surely do much more than atone for it, by the oddities of their habits, by the beauty of their movements, and by their sonorous

cries, so admirably harmonising with those clumps of Scotch firs and those expanses of wild moorland in which they may still, occasionally, be found.

Secondly, my chief field of observation has, as in the case of owls, been not so much in the county of Middlesex in which my working life has been passed—for no wild raven has been heard or seen for many years past, or ever will, I fear, be heard or seen again, within some fifty or more miles of London—as in the county of Dorset, a county which, with its breezy downs, its flint-bestrewn uplands, its dark fir plantations, its limpid streams, its stretches of bog and marsh and heather, its magnificent coastline, often broken into deep and retired inlets, possesses nearly every variety of soil and climate suitable for bird-life. In Dorset, I may add that I have had quite exceptional opportunities, as will be seen hereafter, of studying the raven “at home.” The habits of a bird so “shy and sly” as a raven can be observed, at anything like close quarters, only during the breeding season, when the natural affection of the parent for its young does so much to transform its shyness into familiarity, and its slyness into dauntless courage.

The raven is as nearly cosmopolitan as any bird

can well be. Roughly speaking, he is to be found scattered at intervals over much the greater part of the northern hemisphere—the hemisphere, that is, which contains two-thirds of all the land of the world. To put it more clearly, while he is not found in South America, in Central and Southern Africa, in Australia, in New Zealand or in Polynesia, he is found over the whole of North America, over the whole of Europe, over the north of Africa, and over more than three-fourths of Asia. He penetrates as far northward as land itself appears to stretch—well, that is, into the Polar circle—where he seems positively to revel in the extreme cold. He is still comparatively common in the outer Hebrides, in the Orkney, the Shetland, and the Faröe Islands, where a price is often set upon his head. He is commoner still in Iceland and throughout Scandinavia. It is interesting to note that, in nearly all the regions in which the cult of Odin once held supreme sway, and where it may well be that some lingering relics of the vanished religion still survive, the sacred bird of Odin still holds his own. He ranges throughout Russia in Europe and Russia in Asia to the remote Corea and the still more remote Kurile Islands. He gives some life, and deals, perhaps, as much death, amidst the thinly-peopled wastes of

Central Asia. A much-travelled friend of mine, Mr Robert Hayne, just returned from the Thian Shan mountains, tells me that he is the commonest of all birds there. His croak is to be heard on the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush, on the Suliman mountains and on Mount Elbruz, on the Taurus, the Caucasus, and the Lebanon, on the Balkans, the Alps and the Pyrenees, throughout the whole range of the Atlas, on Mount Sinai, and—as the dawn of history and tradition and the continuity of bird-life seem to demand—on that “huge boundary-stone” where the three empires, Russian, Turkish, and Persian, still meet, Mount Ararat.

To come nearer home: on the mainland of Scotland and Ireland, in spite of incessant persecution, the raven maintains a precarious existence amongst the wild deer forests and the grander of the mountain peaks. In England, though, as I have remarked, he has vanished or is vanishing fast from the midland districts, he still breeds on many of the rifted rocks and the precipitous headlands which mark its coast-line. Till lately—I do not know whether he does so still—he bred on Flamborough and on Beachy Head, and on the Freshwater Cliffs in the Isle of Wight. But he seems to cling most fondly of all to the coasts of

Cornwall, of Devon, and of Dorset. In a walk of a moderate length along the Cornish coast from the Lizard, I have watched three pairs of ravens busy about their nests. I have seen and heard of them repeatedly on the splendid stretch of coast, including Bolt Head and Bolt Tail, which runs between Thurlestone and Salcombe in South Devon ; while, in a rather longer walk along the coast of Dorset, from Whitenose Cliff to St Alban's Head, I have known at least four pairs of ravens rearing or trying to rear their young. Swyre Head would hardly be Swyre Head, Gad Cliff would hardly be Gad Cliff—Studland, where they are strictly preserved by its owner, would hardly be Studland—without its pair of ravens, and without also, I am glad to add, the hereditary friends or foes of the ravens, a pair of peregrine falcons.

I say they *try* to rear their young ; for while the old birds generally take good enough care of themselves and keep just out of the range of shot, the heavy-bodied young, when, at last, they begin to bestir themselves, often flutter down from their nest, hidden as it is beneath an overhanging rock, on to the more accessible ledges, or even to the beach below, where they may easily be captured. The price they fetch, owing to their unique attractions as

pets, from the bird dealers in Leadenhall Market, is so high—some ten or fifteen shillings each—that a brood is rarely reared in safety. But it is probable that the high price paid for the young birds may help to secure the safety of the old; for the expert cragsman, carrying his rope and his life in his hand, who is to be found at the neighbouring villages of Chaldon or West Lulworth, is too much alive to his own interest to kill the goose that lays for him the golden eggs.

What is the raven like? He is highly symmetrical in form. In bearing, he is grave, dignified, and sedate. No one would suspect the fun, the perennial fund of humour, conscious or unconscious—chiefly, I am convinced, the former—which lies behind. His walk is, like himself, stately and deliberate, especially when he is searching the sea-shore and prying into every nook and corner for any food which may have been thrown up upon it, never so well described as in one line of Virgil, remarkable alike for its rhythm and its alliteration:

“Et sola in siccâ secum spatiatûr arenâ.”

“And stalks in stately solitude along the dry sea-sand.”

His eyes are exceptionally bright; but they are of small size, as also are his nostrils, for what they

have to do. It is probable that both nostrils and eyes help him in discovering, at an amazing distance, any offal that has been thrown into the ditch, any sickly lamb that could "never have lived to be turned into mutton," any sheep that has been rendered helpless by being "cast" upon his back.

With the exception of his eyes, which are dark grey or brown, and the graceful and pointed feathers of his neck, which, in certain lights, seem to be shot with purple, he is black all over—feathers, legs, claws, and toes. The stiff bristles which cover half the beak are jet black; so is the beak itself; and it is strange but true—though I have never seen any mention of the fact—that the inside of his mouth and his tongue itself are also black. It is easy to see how country folk, struck by the completeness and intensity of his sable coat, might well conclude that he must be black inside as well as out—be black, that is, at heart; while others, charmed by the gloss and brilliancy of his colouring, might well regard him as almost an ideal of beauty, to which it would be a delicate compliment to compare the dark eyes or hair of their beloved. What says the bride of her lover in the Song of Solomon? "His head is like fine gold; his locks are bushy, and black as a

raven." Or read the exquisite description of Ellen in *The Lady of the Lake* :

"And seldom was a snood amid
Such wild luxuriant ringlets hid,
Whose glossy black to shame might bring
The plumage of the raven's wing."

A pathetic story is told by Ovid of the way in which the raven—like the Black Stone in the Kaaba at Mecca, which was once of dazzling whiteness, but since then, has been turned black by the kisses of sinful mortals—acquired his sable hue. Apollo thought himself happy in the love of the nymph Coronis. But his ignorance was his bliss ; and the raven, his favourite bird and messenger, which was, at that time, white as snow, always prying into secrets and then ready to prate about them, discovered that her heart was elsewhere, and informed the god of it. Infuriated by jealousy, Apollo shot a far-reaching arrow into her bosom, and repented only when it was too late. In vain did he have recourse to his own healing arts ; in vain did he shed

"Tears such as angels weep."

His last sad office was reverently to place the body of his beloved on the funeral pyre ; and then he

turned upon the chatterbox and changed him from white to black :

“ *Inter aves albas vetuit consistere corvum.*”

“ The raven once in snowy plumes was dressed,
White as the whitest dove's unsullied breast ;
His tongue, his prating tongue, had changed him quite
To sooty blackness from the purest white.”

Another legend, not very creditable to the raven, but interesting, as showing the character for cunning and impudence, for malingering and for greed, which he had, even in those early times, acquired, and which he has not got rid of since, is also told by Ovid. Apollo sent him, with a bowl, to fetch some lustral water from the spring, in honour of a festival to Jupiter. The bird started on his errand, as he was ordered ; but some fine figs hanging over the spring took his fancy, and finding that they were green and hard, he determined to wait till they were ripe. When he had eaten them, he killed a big snake, and carrying it back to his master—bowl and lustral water and all—held it up in triumph and said, “ See, here is the foe who has been fighting me off all this time from the spring and from my duty.” The prophet Elisha could hardly have rebuked the greed and falsehood of his servant, Gehazi, with more

dignity and severity, than that with which the god of prophecy now turned upon his guilty messenger. "Went not my heart with thee? Dost thou dare to add a lie to thy guilt? Never henceforward, so long as the figs are hanging green upon the trees, shalt thou taste of water from the spring." The incident was closed; but, according to Ovid, a strange memorial of it, half punishment, it would seem, and half reward, remained. The raven, the snake, and the bowl have, ever since, been seen, in the heavens, side by side; and the constellation which contains them all was long called by astronomers the Corvus or Raven.

Influenced by such legends, and by some of the undoubted characteristics of the raven, Shakespeare is fond of contrasting his "black arts" with the whiteness and innocence of the dove.

"Not Hermia, but Helena I love :
Who will not change a raven for a dove?"

cries Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. So too, the Duke of Illyria, in *Twelfth Night*, says :

"I'll sacrifice the lamb that I do love,
To spite a raven's heart within a dove."

So again, the violent outburst of Queen Margaret

against the "good Duke Humphrey" of Gloucester, in whom her husband still has implicit trust :

"Seems he a dove? His feathers are but borrowed,
For he's disposed as the hateful raven.
Is he a lamb? His skin is surely lent him,
For he's inclin'd as are the ravenous wolves."

And, once more, read the impassioned utterances, the contradictions in terms of the love-lorn Juliet, when she hears of the deed which may separate her from her Romeo :

"Beautiful tyrant! Fiend angelical!
Dove-featured raven, wolfish ravening lamb!"

A white raven was supposed by the ancients to be as much an impossibility, a contravention of the order of nature, as a black swan. Phalanthus, when besieged in a town of Rhodes, having received an oracle that he would remain master of the town "till ravens became white," felt as secure as Macbeth did in his castle, till "Birnam wood" began to "move towards Dunsinane." But the commander of the besieging army, hearing of the oracle, rubbed some ravens with gypsum and let them loose. Phalanthus, on seeing them, abandoned the town in despair. It is now well known that there are such apparent freaks of nature as white ravens, and black swans are also known to exist. Black swans

are common enough in Western Australia, and pied and even white varieties of the raven have been observed in the Outer Hebrides, in the Faröes, and in Iceland. "I have seen," says Boyle, in his book *On Colour*—published before Dr Johnson wrote his Dictionary, and somewhat perfunctorily described the raven, which he might often have seen, had he cared to notice it, in his *Tour in the Hebrides*, as "a large black fowl, said to be remarkably voracious, and whose cry is pretended to be ominous"—"I have seen a perfectly white raven as to bill, as well as feathers;" and there is, if I mistake not, just such a white raven in the Albino case in the British Museum.

How is it, we may well ask, that the raven, whose croak is one of the most awe-inspiring and sepulchral sounds in nature, has not, according to the rule which generally holds good in such cases, received in all languages a name which is onomatopœic—expressive, that is, of his cry? The Greek name *korax* is admirably imitative. The Latin *corvus*, the French *corbeau*, the Spanish *cuervo*, the Italian *corbo*, the Cumbrian and Northumbrian *croupy crow*, the Highland *corbie crow*, the English words *crow* and *croak*, connected with him, will pass muster. The strange thing is that the names given

him by the Teutonic and Scandinavian nations, among whom he was best known and most honoured, though they are said by Professor Skeat to be derived from a root "krap," Latin "crepare," "to make a sound," are not specially imitative of any one of the many remarkable sounds he makes. Such are the Anglo-Saxon "hræfu" or "hrefu," the Icelandic "hrafu," the Old High German "hraban," the Dutch "raaf," the Danish "ravn," the German "rabe," the English "raven," and, perhaps, "Ralph." I only note the fact; I cannot offer any explanation of it.

What about the food of the raven?—a somewhat unsavoury but interesting part of the subject, and highly illustrative of his strength, his sagacity, his adaptability to circumstances. Like most of his tribe, the raven is, in the strictest sense of the word, omnivorous. His dietary ranges from a worm to a whale. During certain months of the year, he feeds largely on grubs and insects, and then he does unmixed good. Sometimes, he takes to berries, fruits, and grain. Snakes and frogs and moles never come amiss to him. Of rats he is passionately fond; and when, after the threshing of a rick, the usual massacre of rats has taken place, the raven, if they are within the wide range of his scent

or his sight, is sure to present himself and claim his share. If the word "ravenous" is not derived from "raven"—as Professor Skeat tells us it is not, and we are bound to believe him—it might well be so, for it exactly expresses what the raven ever has been, ever is, and ever will be; and when, in addition to his own voracity, he has to supply that of the five or six "young ravens that cry," he is bound to fly at higher game, and will "lift" without scruple a nest of partridge's eggs, a rabbit, or a leveret. When his nest is built, as it generally is, beneath some overhanging rock which quite conceals it from view from above, its position may sometimes be discovered by the remains of rabbits, neatly laid, in the short grass on the top of the cliff, in what I was going to call his "larder." But a larder implies an amount of economy and self-restraint, which apart from his purely secretive tendencies, it is not in the raven to practise. "Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them." A rabbit warren is, generally, not far distant from the raven's eyrie; and the young rabbits, as they sun themselves in front of their burrows, fall an easy prey. On one occasion the old warrener at Whitenose Cliff told me that he had counted the

parent birds bringing as many as five rabbits within an hour to their clamorous brood. As the season gets on, the raven varies the diet of his nurslings by giving them the eggs of the cormorant or the seagull which he finds on the adjoining ledges. He will spike them with his bill and carry them off in triumph ; he will even, at times, enter the burrow of the puffin, and a battle-royal will take place for the possession of her eggs, beneath the surface of the earth. The puffin is a small bird, but it is armed with a huge razor-like bill which, if it does not beat the intruder off, will at least give him a squeeze which he will remember for a long time to come.

All this on occasion ; but at other times a sort of "truce of God" seems to be established between the raven and his nearest neighbours. There is, apparently, an honourable understanding between them that, being his neighbours, they are free of the guild ; and he will leave their eggs, exposed as they are, quite unmolested, while he carries off those which are more remote. In like manner, a hill fox in Scotland will often leave the poultry and the geese and the turkeys which are near his "earth" severely alone, and will travel past them, for miles, by night, to get others which he will have to carry toilfully home. He wishes, no doubt from motives of self-

preservation, to be on good terms with those who, if they are so minded, can do him most harm. So, too, a pair of ravens watched by Professor A. Newton, from year to year, at their inland breeding-place in Norfolk, carefully abstained from molesting the sheep and lambs and game which abounded within their sight, and lived almost entirely upon the moles whose burrows were further away.

In moorland districts, where food is scarce, the ravens will attack without scruple a newly-born lamb or even a sheep that has been "cast." His method is always the same, and has been noticed to be so from the earliest times. He goes straight at the eye, which one blow of his powerful beak will destroy. "The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it." *Cornicum oculos configere*, "to dig out the eyes of the ravens," was a proverbial expression used by Cicero, equivalent to our proverb "the biter bit." Another English proverb, true enough as a general statement of fact in Natural History, tells us that "hawks don't pick out hawks' een"; but Mr Ralph Bankes of Kingston Lacy, in Dorset, a great protector of ravens, was the eye-witness, like Cain in the Koran, of a curious exception to the rule,

in the case of his favourite bird. "In 1885," he says, "I saw, one morning, on the lawn here, a fine old raven. Immediately afterwards, a second one pitched down and a battle-royal took place. One of the birds—I could not discover whether it was cock or hen—was pecked in the eye and killed on the spot." It was a case of the "biter bit," "*cornix cornici oculos confodit*," with a vengeance. The phrase *pasce corvos*, "be food for the ravens," among the Romans, like ἴθι ἐς κόρακας, "go to the ravens," or βάλλ' ἐς κόρακας, "fling him to the ravens," among the Greeks, were curses imprecating utter disgrace and ruin. They involved death, mutilation by a bird of evil omen, want of burial. And want of burial carried with it disagreeable consequences in the other world. Charon would not ferry the soul over the Styx.

But what the raven loves most of all is carrion ; and thereby, like the vulture in the desert, or like the kite in mediæval cities, or the adjutant in Eastern cities now, he, no doubt, plays his appointed part in creation. The carcase of any animal lying on hill or valley, or anything and everything thrown up by the tide, from a mollusc or a shellfish to a shark or a whale, he claims as his own. A shellfish, when it proves too hard a nut for him to

crack with his bill, he has been seen to carry high in air and drop upon the rocks. The islands round the west and north of Scotland still afford one of the best fields for the observation of the raven when he is at work. And Macgillivray, who, some sixty years ago, used to watch them with a telescope from huts he had put up for the purpose, has given a graphic description of their *modus operandi*, the gist of which I reproduce.

When a raven discovers a dead sheep, he always first alights at a considerable distance from it, looks carefully around, and utters a low croak. He then advances nearer, in his queer sidelong fashion, eyes his prey wistfully, and then, plucking up his courage, leaps upon him and makes a closer examination. Discovering no cause of alarm—no suspicion, that is, of a trap or poison—he gives a louder croak, pecks out an eye and part of the tongue, and devours them. By this time, another raven, and another, and another will have arrived, when they dig out together the intestines, and continue to feed on the carcase till they are sated or disturbed. Sometimes a greater black-backed gull, a skua, a fox, or even a dog, will have a “look in,” and be allowed to join in the feast. *Feris convivialis*, “he will banquet with wild beasts,” says Linnæus tersely of

the raven. He was probably describing what he had himself often seen in Sweden ; and one of the names by which the raven or corbie crow is known in the Highlands, "biadh tach," is said to have much the same meaning.*

If a whale be thrown ashore, the good news spreads, no one quite knows how, along

" Island and promontory, creek and bay,"

throughout the Hebrides. The raven is, in no sense of the word, gregarious ; on the contrary, he has a passion for solitude. He will tolerate no rival, not even his own offspring, in the neighbourhood of his ancestral throne. He drives them ruthlessly away, as soon as they are able to shift for themselves. But, on an occasion like this, his voracity overpowers his wish to be alone. Other ravens drop in by twos and threes till they have been counted by hundreds. There they take up their abode, for weeks and even months, till the huge carcase has been picked clean. On one occasion, the inhabitants of a small island feared that the prolonged stay of the ravens might end in an attack on the barley crop which was soon to ripen and to supply their illicit whisky stills. Something must

* Macgillivray's *British Birds*, i. 498 seq.

be done. A crafty cragsman managed to capture some of the ravens on the ledge on which they roosted at night, heavy with sleep and food. He plucked off all their feathers, except those of their wings and tails, and turned them adrift in the morning. The other ravens, either failing, with all their acuteness, to recognise their uncanny piebald comrades, or reading in them their own future fate, left the island, not to return.

I have said that the raven is a very solitary bird, except when the cry of "carrion afield" on a colossal scale, causes him to put up, for a time, with the society of his kind. But two exceptions to the rule, one of which came under my brother's, the other under my own notice, are worth recording. Colonel Walter Marriott Smith, R.A., tells me that, in winter, the raven becomes gregarious on the margin of the hills and plains in Northern India.

I have seen them by hundreds on a vacated barrack near Peshawur, during the last Afghan war. I have also watched one of them, when no other human being was visible, regularly stationing himself opposite to the fowls' big wire enclosure at Peshawur, and setting to work to systematically imitate their sounds, and ridiculing them, with an air of contemptuous superiority.

My own experience was at Athens, in January 1898. The green slopes of Lycabettus, the lofty hill

outside the city, which so dwarfs the Acropolis and the Areopagus within it, were dotted with ravens, walking about in groups of threes or fours, and, anon, congregating together, to the number of about seventy. They were not there for purposes of carrion—there was none about. It was a more serious business. No clerical convocation could have looked more sober and sedate; nor, so far as appearances went, could have more weighty matters to discuss. Why were they there? My theory is that the convocation consisted of the young birds of the previous year which had recently been sent about their business by their parents, and, by a curious coincidence, had met from all the adjoining parts of Greece at the metropolis, and were now about to take the most far-reaching step in their career. They were about to choose a mate, not for a year, or term of years, but for a lifetime; and a raven, it is to be remembered to his credit, is never false to his choice.

One other interesting experience of a raven abroad should be mentioned here. I was on a visit to the site of Carthage and went out to view the Roman aqueduct, several arches of which, nearly as high as those of the Pont du Gard, still march across a remote plain in stately procession. On the

top of one of these, a big owl had built her nest ; on the other side of it, a raven had built hers ; a curious mixture of associations, archæological and religious, the bird of Pallas and the bird of Odin nestling together in amity, on a building reared by the Roman worshippers of Jupiter and Juno, and which long supplied the wants of the descendants of the Phœnicians, who clung, with desperate tenacity, to their ancestral worship of Baal and of Ashtaroth.

The bill of the raven is a formidable weapon, strong, stout, sharp at the edges, curved towards the tip. It is his one weapon of offence, but it answers the purpose of two or three. Like the dirk of the Highlanders, among whom he is still so often found, it is equally available as a dagger or as a carving-knife. It can also be used as a pair of pincers. It can kill a rat at one blow, crush its head into pulp with one squeeze, and then, with its powerful pull, can tear the muscles asunder, or strip off the flesh in small morsels from the bones. It can drive its beak right through the spines of a hedgehog and deal it a death-blow. It is said that it will never attack a man. If this be true, it is, I think, not so much from any defect of courage, as from his keen intellectual perception of what will pay and what will not. A raven, and still more a

pair of them, will beat off and mob the formidable skua gull, the Iceland falcon, the sea or the golden eagle itself. It will even engage in a not wholly unequal combat, on the ground, with the long-necked heron, one direct blow of whose spear-like beak would kill him on the spot.

Three striking compliments paid by the Romans, the masters of the art of war, to the strength and formidable nature of the raven's beak may be mentioned here.

First, it was nothing but the help, as the story goes, of a raven which, perching on the helmet of the Roman champion, Valerius, and striking with beak and wings against the gigantic Gaul opposed to him, secured the victory for Rome and gave to Valerius, in consequence, his own name of *Corvus*, which he bore as a name of honour ever afterwards.

Secondly, it was nothing but the spike fixed at the end of the mast and drawbridge invented by Duillius, in the first Punic war, and called, from its resemblance to a raven's beak, the *Corvus* or *Korax*, which, when it fell on the deck of a Carthaginian vessel, pinned it to itself in fatal embrace, and so, changing the sea into a land battle, gave to Rome her first naval victory over the masters of the sea.

And, once more, the same terrible name of

destiny was given to the grappling-hook or engine which now tore down stones from the walls of a besieged city, and now, again, when planted on the walls of the besieged, would, by a sudden swing, whip up one of the besiegers from the ground and fling him far into the city.

More memorable even than these tributes to the strength and courage of the raven, is one rendered by the same stalwart people to the sociability, the cleverness, the mischief of a tame bird, which had managed to become the pet of the whole city. The indignation excited at Saltburn-on-Sea, in Yorkshire, a few years ago, by the killing of a tame raven, the favourite, for years, of its inhabitants and its summer visitors, by a thoughtless tripper, may, perhaps, be still remembered; and at Blandford, Dr Williamson Daniel possesses a magnificent raven which roams freely over the town and neighbourhood, and whose death would be regarded as a calamity even by Lord Portman's keepers, who, unfortunately, do not spare the wild ravens which occasionally still try to nest in his domains. But no English town would, I suppose, do for a tame raven quite what imperial Rome is related, by Pliny the Elder, with every circumstance of time and place, to have done for one particular bird. In the

reign of Tiberius, a raven selected for her eyrie the top of the temple of Castor and Pollux in the Forum. One of the young birds happened to flutter down into a cobbler's shop in the city, and claimed or received at once the religious reverence and the hospitality of its owner. It soon learned to talk, and made a practice of flying, each morning, to the rostra—still rich with the memories of the eloquence of Hortensius and Cicero—and perching thereon, would wish "Good morning," by name, first, to the reigning Emperor, Claudius, then to the Cæsars, his heirs, Germanicus and Drusus, and afterwards, to any other passer-by. Then, returning to the cobbler's shop, he would, after the manner of his kind, help or hinder every one at his work, and became a universal favourite. A neighbouring cobbler, jealous of the popularity his rival's shop had thereby acquired, or angered by the sully, in his own shop, of some newly-made sandals by the peripatetic bird, killed it with a blow. The people rose in their fury, and first drove away and then killed the murderer. A public funeral was given to the bird; its body was laid upon a costly bier which was borne aloft on the shoulders of two Nubians, ebony black as their burden; a trumpeter marched before, and persons bearing wreaths and "floral

offerings" of every description, while an unnumbered crowd of mourners followed after, till the solemn procession reached a lofty funeral pyre, which had been constructed on the Appian Way, two miles from the city; and then and there, in a level spot of ground called Rediculum, on the 28th of March, in the consulship of M. Servilius and C. Cestius, the ashes of the favourite were laid to rest among the magnates of the great Valerian or Cornelian families. Such was the tribute, quaintly or grimly remarks Pliny, to the character and genius (*ingenium avis*) of a murdered raven, by the city which had not cared to investigate or revenge the murder of Scipio Æmilianus, the conqueror and destroyer of Numantia and Carthage!

CHAPTER III

THE RAVEN IN POETRY, HISTORY, HAGIOLOGY, AND FOLK-LORE

THE raven, as I have already pointed out, has a right to be considered the king of birds, and in view of the large part he has played in history, ancient and mediæval; in literature, especially in poetry, ancient, mediæval, and modern; in art, in religious legend, and in folk-lore, it may be well, before I relate some of my own experiences with him, to devote a separate chapter to the thoughts which men have had about him, and the influence which he has, in turn, had over them. It is a subject which is full of interest in itself and has never, so far as I know, been dealt with in detail before. Poets are often the creators as well as the best exponents of popular beliefs, and in gathering up, as best I may, the widely scattered threads of the subject, from so many different centuries and countries and languages, I shall have frequent

recourse to them, and quote somewhat largely from their writings. How is it, I would ask, to begin with, that while some nations appear to regard him with affection, with respect, with religious veneration, others look upon him with fear, with hatred, with disgust? How is it that, in some latitudes, he is sacrosanct, in others, an outlaw and an ogre?

A prophet may be a prophet of either good or evil, and the raven has been almost universally regarded as a prophet of evil.

"I would croak like a raven,
I would bode, I would bode."

Is it best to propitiate or to ignore and defy him? When observed by the Roman augurs, he was generally on the left hand, and was therefore ominous of ill; and he not only, it was believed, foresees evil, he gloats over it, he helps to bring it on. Danger and disgrace, disease and death, are to him the breath of his life. In them he holds a ghastly revelry. Like the splendid personification of Death itself in *Paradise Lost*, he can sniff them from afar.

"Death

Grinned horrible a ghastly grin to hear
His famine should be fill'd, and blest his maw
Destined to that good hour."

He hovers over a house in which there is to be a death, even before the disease, which is to be its precursor, has appeared. He brings infection with him, and spreads it as he flies—

“The sad-presaging raven tolls
The sick man’s passport in her hollow beak.
And in the shadow of the silent night
Doth shake contagion from her sable wing.”

He is on the field of battle, ready for the feast, long before the carnage has begun.

“As when a flock
Of ravenous fowl through many a league remote,
Against the day of battle, to a field
Where armies lie encamped, come flying, lured
With scent of living carcasses.”

And it is the raven, according to the poets, who occupies the foremost place among all

“The birds obscene that croak and jar
And sniff the carnage from afar.”

Thus, Sir Walter Scott assigns to him the primacy in the well-known lines :—

“Each bird of evil omen woke,
The raven gave his fatal croak,
And shrieked the night-crow from the oak,
The screech owl from the thicket broke
And fluttered down the dell.”

When Alexander the Great entered Babylon, in triumph, on his return from the remoter East, the gathering of ravens there was believed, by Greeks and Orientals alike, to portend his death ; and so in the remoter West, when Guinevere, her guilt discovered, had parted, for the last time, from her lover, Lancelot, and was making her way alone to the sanctuary at Almesbury,

“She heard the spirits of the waste and weald
Moan as she fled, or thought she heard them moan :
And in herself she moaned, ‘Too late ! too late !’
Till, in the cold wind that foreruns the morn,
A blot in heaven, the raven, flying high,
Croaked ; and she thought ‘He spies a field of death.’”

In more modern times, the legend is well known which, for centuries past, has connected every misfortune—and their name is legion—that has happened to the great House of Hapsburg, with the appearance of a raven ; and never, I suppose, have the coincidences, or whatever we may call them, been more numerous than in the long reign of the present Emperor. The accession of Francis Joseph to the throne with all its weight of sorrow ; the departure of his brother Maximilian to an Empire and to his murder in Mexico ; the departure of the Archduchess, Maria Christina, for a throne in Spain

which was to prove hardly less ill-fated than that in Mexico ; lastly, the crowning tragedy of the murder of the Empress Elizabeth at Geneva ;—all these events are affirmed, with every detail of time and place, to have been heralded or accompanied by the appearance, under remarkable circumstances, of a raven or ravens.

The mysterious, the uncanny powers of the raven, his means of avenging himself for a wrong, do not cease with his life. The enchantress Medea, when she is mixing a life-potion by which to restore, in defiance of the Fates, her aged father to the bloom of his youth, drops into the caldron, like the weird sisters, first, the most potent herbs and simples of her country, then, the bones and body of an owl, then, some slices of wolf, and, last and best of all, the head and beak of a raven who had seen nine generations of men pass away. And so in the remotest West, the medicine man, among the North American Indians, is said, when he is peering into the future, to carry on his back three raven-skins with their tails fixed at right angles to his body, while, on his head, he wears a split raven-skin, so fastened as to let the huge and formidable beak project from the forehead. In Sweden, it is the current belief that the ravens which croak by night

in the forest swamps and wild moorlands are the ghosts of murdered persons, whose bodies have been concealed there by their undetected murderers, and have not received Christian burial. In Denmark, the appearance of a raven in a village is supposed to portend the death of the village priest ; while in Languedoc, it is the belief that a wicked priest is himself changed, after death, into a raven, and a wicked nun into a crow. In some parts of Germany, witches, it is believed, ride astride upon a raven ; and the Evil One himself, at times, assumes the raven shape ; while in the Tyrol, and other parts of Central Europe, there is a widespread belief in the famous "raven-stone," a stone which the raven procures somehow from the sea, and which, like the "eagle-stone" of the eagle, and the "spring-wort" of the woodpecker, is supposed to have talismanic powers, especially the power possessed by the ring of Gyges in antiquity, of rendering any one, who has the good luck to acquire it, invisible. The raven brings the mysterious stone to her nest, when one of her young has been killed and left within it by the crafty marauder, apparently hoping that, when it is placed within its throat, it will bring back her dead offspring to life. Back comes the robber, climbs the rock or tree, and

carries off in triumph the precious treasure.* Beliefs like these have often given a partial protection to the raven in countries where he most needed it. The Highlanders, for instance, who are quite willing that others should kill the raven, are not often willing to kill one themselves. Others, who would, on no account, shoot a raven, are willing to put down a strychnined egg for him, leaving him, as they flatter themselves, to be the agent of his own destruction. "Wickedness proceedeth from the wicked, but my hand shall not be upon thee." To this day, in England, the prosperity of many a great family is supposed to depend upon the safety of the raven which has deigned to make his domicile under its protection. If he meets a violent death, a member of the family is sure to die within the year. No one who has read the *Bride of Lammermoor*, the most weird and tragical of all Scott's novels, and has watched the storm gathering fast over the ill-fated lovers, can have forgotten the scene, terrible in its grandeur, when, just as Edgar Ravenswood and Lucy Ashton were leaving the haunted well, which had been the witness of their engagement, the raven, the sacred

* For some of these details see *Provincial Names of British Birds*, by Rev. Charles Swainson, p. 91.

bird of the Ravenswood race, was struck down by a bolt from the crossbow of Henry Ashton, and, falling at their feet, stained the dress of Lucy with some drops of his life-blood. "Do you know," cries Edgar to the murderer, "that the ravens are all under the protection of the Lords of Ravenswood, and that to kill one of them in their presence is such bad luck that it deserves the stab?"

A bird so resourceful and so ubiquitous as the raven, which had played so conspicuous a part in two episodes of the Old Testament, and had been so pointedly referred to by our Lord in the New—the only bird, it should be remarked, except the sparrow, from which He draws a moral—would be sure to be heard of in the record of the trials and the temptations, the failures and the triumphs, of the early Christian saints and martyrs. And, what is especially to be noted here, the view taken of him in these histories or legends is always favourable. The raven may almost be said to have a hagiology of his own; so great were the services he rendered to St Athanasius, for instance, and St Paul the Hermit, to St Benedict and St Vincent, to our own St Oswald and St Hugh of Lincoln, or to St Meinrad of Einsiedeln in Switzerland. To some

of these, in their solitary cells, the raven was always the cherished and often the only companion.

St Athanasius, who by his learning, his rapidity of movement, his prophetic anticipations, no less than by the sanctity of his life, won for himself, like Gerbert, Pope Sylvester the Second, of later times, a great reputation as a magician among the mongrel Græco-Romano-Egyptian population of Alexandria, was, one day, passing through its great square. A raven happened to fly, croaking, over his head. The mob gathered round him and asked what it meant by its croak. "Don't you know?" he replied with ready wit. "He is saying '*Cras, cras,*' 'To-morrow, to-morrow'; and 'to-morrow' something which you regard as sad, will certainly fall upon you. Your Pagan festival will be suppressed by the Emperor." And suppressed by the Emperor, on the morrow, it actually was. One wonders which gained most in reputation with the populace, the raven or the saint.

For seventy-five years, St Antony had lived alone in the desert, living down, as early Christian art in all the chief picture galleries of Europe still testifies, the temptations and attacks of the Evil One; till, one day, he felt something like a touch of spiritual pride in the sanctity to which he had thus attained.

But a voice came from heaven, "There is a holier man than thou, who has lived with Me in the desert, not merely for seventy-five, but for ninety years." The lesser saint went forth in quest of the greater, to do him homage ; and, after three days' wandering, he found his cell and humbly craved admittance. While they were talking together, lo ! a raven brought a loaf of bread and set it down between them. "For sixty years," exclaimed St Paul, the Hermit, "has that raven brought me half a loaf a day ; and now that thou has come to me, see, he has brought a whole loaf, half for me and half for thee." They passed the afternoon and evening in converse sweet on things divine, which proved to be a veritable *nunc dimittis* to the elder of the two saints ; for he passed peaceably away next morning, and was buried by the younger, St Antony, on the spot which he had consecrated by his hermit life.

Less striking, and with a less sombre termination, is the service said to have been rendered by his tame raven, on one occasion, to St Benedict. Florentius, a neighbouring priest, who was jealous of his superior sanctity, had sent him a poisoned loaf. St Benedict divining his intention, flung the loaf on the ground, and bade his companion remove it to a place where no living thing could find it. The raven

did as he was told, abstained, "though ravenous," from eating it himself, and came back, after three hours' absence, to receive his usual dole of food from the hand of the Saint.

And what about St Vincent? He is, perhaps, less universally famous and his story less known than the preceding; but he has left his mark upon the map of Europe. He had been put to death with torture, at Saragossa, and his body thrown, by the tyrant's order, to the wild beasts; but they were driven off by a raven, and the body was carried by the brethren to Valencia, and buried there.* Centuries afterwards, when the Moors took the place and turned the Christians out, the exiles went forth, carrying with them the body and the relics of the Saint as their greatest treasure. The ship which bore it and them, was driven ashore on a promontory in Portugal; his relics were duly reburied there, and were again guarded by ravens. The promontory has, ever since, been called after him St Vincent, a spot famous,

* See Appendix I. for the story of St Vincent and the raven, as told in verse, in a South English Legendary, *circa* A.D. 1285, Bodleian MSS. My friend, Canon Christopher Wordsworth, who first brought it to my notice, has, along with other help, kindly given me a vigorous poetical paraphrase, done by himself, of the rather difficult southern English. It, too, will be found in the Appendix.

perhaps, above all other spots, in the history of naval discovery and warfare, for this was the spot chosen by Prince Henry the "Navigator" for his school of seamanship, whence, under his auspices, the ships sailed which discovered Madeira and the Azores, and afterwards, explored the whole of the West Coast of Africa. The waters round it have been the scene of no less than three English victories—that of Rodney in 1780, of Jervis and Nelson in 1797, of Sir Charles Napier in 1833. The rock, where the raven kept watch over the Saint's body, is still called, by the natives, "the raven-rock"—El Monte de las cuervas, as it was called by the Moors themselves, Kenisata-l-gorab, or "the church of the raven."

When St Oswald, the most eminent of our early Saxon princes, the man whom the venerable Bede characterises as "the Beloved of God"; the man who sent for Aidan from Iona, and gave him the Isle of Lindisfarne, whence Christianity was to spread far and wide among the heathen of the mainland; the man who died fighting—saint and martyr and king in one—against Penda the pagan king of Mercia, was being crowned king of Northumbria, and the chrismatory containing the holy oil was broken, a raven, so runs the legend, forthwith appeared, carrying in his bill another

chrismatory, with a letter affirming that St Peter himself had consecrated it; and, later on, this same, or another raven, was sent by the king with a ring and letter, containing a proposal of marriage, to the maiden of his choice. Deeds these, which are duly recalled in the artistic representations of St Oswald in some of the fifty-seven churches in England which are called after him.

St Hugh of Lincoln, one of the noblest of Christian prelates in the whole course of English history, was like other saints, notably St Francis, always fond of birds; and long after his death, when, in 1365, thieves carried off the jewelled relic of his hand, and having stripped it bare, threw it away in a field, a raven is said to have kept watch and ward over it, till it was discovered and restored to its proper resting-place. The thieves, affrighted, gave themselves up to justice, and were hanged at Lincoln.

Once more, St Meinrad, who dwelt in a cell—over which has now risen the monastery of Einsiedeln—a noted place of pilgrimage in Switzerland—was murdered by two robbers, who, having done the deed and found no booty, took themselves off, undiscovered, as they imagined, to a little inn at Zürich. But two ravens who had been the only

companions of the hermit, pursued them with loud croakings over hill and dale, and then kept flapping their wings against the window of their room, till the terror-stricken murderers confessed their sin. The inn has, ever since, been called "The Raven Inn," and the two avenging birds are carved in black stone on one of its walls. When Longfellow visited it, the murderers seem to have been succeeded by extortioners; for he writes thus in his "Hyperion" of the sorry entertainment that he received there, and of its costliness :

"Beware of the Raven of Zürich !
 'Tis a bird of omen ill,
 With a noisy and unclean breast,
 And a very, very long bill ! " *

The deeds of a bird which the sacred traditions of so many centuries, or millenniums, from the prophet Elijah down to St Meinrad or St Hugh of Lincoln, represent as the cherished and faithful companion of so many saints, as rendering services of every kind to them, as so ready to prevent, to detect, or to punish crime, might, almost of themselves, deserve a place in the magnificent folios of the *Acta Sanctorum*.

But to return from the saints to the poets and

* Quoted in *Provincial Names of British Birds*, p. 91.

to popular ideas about the raven. Nothing that was sad was supposed to be above, nothing beneath, his notice.

"Sæpe sinistrâ cava prædixit ab ilice cornix,"

cries the shepherd in the *Georgics*, wise after the event, who has lost his twin lambs.

"That raven on the left-hand oak,
Curse on his ill-betiding croak,
Bodes me no good,"

cries the old English housewife, as she is driving her old mare to market, laden with eggs; and the warning had scarcely been given and received, before down came the old mare, and all her eggs were smashed.* Spencer, the poets' poet, speaks of the bird as

"The hoarse night raven, trump of doleful drere."

Hood describes him as

"A cursed bird too crafty to be shot,
That always cometh with his soot-black coat
To make hearts dreary,—for he is a blot
Upon the book of life."

Southey tells us that

"The raven croaked as she sat at her meat,
And the old woman knew what he said;
And she grew pale at the raven's tale,
And sickened and went to her bed."

* Waterton, *Essays*, p. 288.

It is recorded in *Notes and Queries*, 1853, that "on a recent occasion" the relieving officer made a formal application for relief, on behalf of a single woman, living in the wild and scattered village of Alternon, near Launceston in Cornwall, as she was unable to work "through grief" and depression of mind, owing to the croaking of a raven over her cottage. Whether the relief was granted I do not know; but "a raven on the nerves" would probably produce a prostration of mind and body which might well call for it.

To this day, I am told that the old Highland deer-stalker, when he sallies forth in the early morning to "spy" for a stag, regards it as a good omen—not for the stag, but for himself—if he sees a raven hovering over him or hears his croak. The raven, it would seem, knows what the stalker can only hope for, that he "will see a stag die ere the day be spent." In old times, a particular bone in the stag's body—hence called "the raven's bone"—used to be set apart as the perquisite of the prophetic bird. What wonder that he came to look out for and to claim it?

"The raven on the blasted oak,
That watching while the deer is broke
His morsel claims with sullen croak."

Well might Pliny, grounding his judgment, I suppose, on the obviously superior intelligence of the crow tribe, remark that other birds, eagles, owls, woodpeckers, can give omens, but the raven and his congeners alone seem to realise what the omens which they give, portend.

If you wish to hear or overhear the table-talk of these birds of evil omen, go to *The Twa Corbies*, written by that "famous poet Anon.," who used so to excite one's boyish curiosity by the mystery that hung over his many and varied poems, and note what has been well called its "wild vigour and almost fierce sincerity."

"As I was walking all alane
I heard twa corbies making a mane ;
The tane unto the t'other say,
'Where sall we gang and dine to-day?'

"'In behint yon auld fail dyke
I wot there lies a new slain Knight ;
And naebody kens that he lies there,
But his hawk, his hound, and his lady fair.

"'His hound is to the hunting gane
His hawk to fetch the wild fowl hame,
His lady's ta'en another mate
So we may make our dinner sweet.

"'Ye'll sit on his white hause-bane,
And I'll pick out his bonny blue een ;
Wi' ae lock of his gowden hair
We'll theek our nest when it grows bare.

“ ‘ Many a one for him makes mane,
 But nane sall ken where he is gane ;
 O'er his white banes, when they are bare,
 The wind sall blaw for evermair.’ ”

While, if you wish to picture to yourself the bird in its most grim, most weird, most shadowy, most suggestive shape, go to Edgar Allan Poe, who, in a poem which, if it had been his only one, must have won for himself, as well as for his subject, a literary immortality, has succeeded in doing for the raven, very much what Coleridge had done for the albatross in the *Ancient Mariner*. The raven himself seems to stand before you *in propria personâ*. You hear him “tapping, rapping,” you see him “sitting, sitting, never flitting,”

“ On the pallid bust of Pallas
 Just above the chamber door.”

You ponder in your inmost soul, the burden, half revealed and half concealed, of his melancholy refrain : “ Never—never more.”

“ Then this ebony bird beguiling
 My sad fancy into smiling
 By the grave and stern decorum
 Of the countenance it wore,

‘Though thy crest be shorn and shaven,
Thou,’ I said, ‘art sure no craven,
Ghastly, grim, and ancient raven,
Wandering from the Nightly shore.
Tell me what thy lordly name is
On the Night’s Plutonian shore!’
Quoth the raven, ‘Never more!’

“‘Be that wondrous sign our parting,
Bird or fiend,’ I shrieked upstarting.
‘Get thee back into the tempest
And the Night’s Plutonian shore.
Leave no black plume as a token
Of that lie thy soul hath spoken,
Leave my loneliness unbroken.
Quit the bust above my door,
Take thy beak from out my heart, and
Take thy form from off my door.’
Quoth the raven, ‘Never more.’”

But let us turn to Shakespeare, whose imagination, as I have pointed out, seems to have been attracted by the raven more than by any other bird. When the ghosts of Julius Cæsar and his murderer are about to “meet at Philippi” on the fatal battlefield, his friend Cassius notices, to his horror, that the eagles, the natural guardians of the Roman legion, have taken to flight:

“And in their stead, the raven, crows, and kites
Fly o’er our heads, and downward look on us
As we were sickly prey.”

In the "players' scene" in *Hamlet*, just before the poison is dropped into the sleeper's ear, in the presence of the guilty King and Queen, the Prince of Denmark, who is watching the "galled jade wince," while his own "withers are unwrung," exclaims in triumph, not yet understood by the King :

"The croaking raven
Doth bellow for revenge."

And, in a still more appalling scene, Lady Macbeth, who has just heard of the prediction of the three weird sisters, and is making up her man's mind to fulfil them herself, exclaims when she hears of the unlooked-for approach of the King of Scotland :

"The raven himself is hoarse,
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements."

So with Othello ; struggling in the toils set for him by the arch-fiend Iago, and asked whether he remembers the handkerchief given by him to Desdemona, he exclaims in agony :

"O, it comes o'er my memory
As doth the raven o'er the infected house,
Boding to all."

When England is in the depth of degradation

under the dastardly John, it is the Bastard who exclaims :

“ Now powers from home and discontent at home
Meet in our land, and vast confusion waits,
As doth a raven on a sick-fallen beast,
The imminent decay of wrested pomp.”

Read, too, the imprecation which the misbegotten Caliban—

“ Abhorred slave,
Which any print of goodness will not take,
Being capable of all ill ”

—hurls at the head of his master, Prospero, and his lovely daughter, Miranda :

“ As wicked dew as ere my mother brushed
With raven’s feather from unwholesome fen
Drop on you both ! A south-west blow on ye
And blister you all o’er !
All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you ! ”

A curious belief common among the Jews and Arabs, and not unknown in the West—as shown by the Danish phrase “ ravn-mudder ” for a “ bad mother ”—that the raven is an unnatural parent and leaves her young to starve in the nest, is alluded to, on two occasions, by Shakespeare, and an equally curious explanation is given of it. In

the *Winter's Tale*, Antigonus, when compelled by its unnatural father, Leontes, to expose to death the infant child, prays for it as follows :—

“Come on, poor babe :
Some powerful spirit instruct the kites and ravens
To be thy nurses ! Wolves and bears, they say,
Casting their savageness aside, have done
Like offices of piety.”

While a passage in *Titus Andronicus* put the charge more clearly thus :

“Some say that ravens foster forlorn children,
The whilst their own birds famish in their nests.”

The belief rested, I suspect, in the first instance, on two or three passages of the Bible put together : the story of Elijah fed by ravens ; the verse in the Psalms, “Who feedeth the young ravens when they cry” ; and a similar verse in Job, “Who provideth for the raven his food ? When the young ones cry unto God, they wander for lack of meat.” A writer, in an old magazine, not only takes the truth of the story for granted, but elaborately explains how it is that the whole breed of ravens does not cease to exist in consequence. “Young ravens are forsaken by their parents before they are fledged, and therefore they would starve, if

Providence had not appointed that the scraps of raw meat, dropped round the nest, should engender maggots and worms, which serve to support them, till they are in a condition to rove for food. And thus it is that He 'feedeth the ravens'!"

More quaint, more detailed, and more interesting still is the explanation, given in a very early Egyptian commentary, of the fourth century, on St Luke, and quoted by Mr Swainson, of the supposed hard-heartedness of the raven towards its young: "God heareth the young ravens when they cry unto Him." Why, asks the commentator, is nothing of the kind said of doves, as of any other white or heavenly kind of bird—why does the evangelist mention no name amongst birds, except ravens only? Because, he replies to his own question, the hen-raven, having laid her eggs, and hatched her young, is about to fly away and leave them, on account of their colour; for when hatched, they are red in appearance. Then the Nourisher of all Creation sends to them a little swarm of insects, putting it by their nest, and thus the little ravens are fed, until the colour of their body is, as it were, dyed, and becomes black. After four days, the old ravens return, and seeing that the bodies of their young have become black, like their own, henceforward they take to them and

bring them food of their own accord.* To make the picture complete, Swan, the author of *Speculum Mundi*, 1643 A.D., tells us, in a passage also quoted by Mr Swainson, that this temporary disgust on the part of the parents is repaid with interest by their offspring, "for when they be old and have their bills overgrown, they die of famine, not sharpening their bills again by beating them on a stone, as the eagle doth. Neither will their young ones help them, but rather set upon them when they are not able to resist." The Royal Society, in the hey-day of their youth, were too much taken aback—or were they too courteous or too courtier-like?—to throw any doubt upon the data assumed in the famous problem of the bowl of water and the fish, so solemnly put before them by their first royal patron, King Charles II. Nor does it seem

* See Appendix II. for "an enigma" of the twelfth century, kindly brought to my notice by Mr W. Ravencroft of Reading. It is written in rather sorry Latin hexameters, but contains some very curious allusions to the story of the Deluge, to the raven's disobedience to Noah, to his punishment on land for his delinquencies on the water, and his inability, owing, I suppose, to the doom pronounced on him by Apollo, for his mischief-making in the matter of Coronis, described in the last chapter, to look at, or to feed his white or red callow offspring, till they have got their coat of black feathers. The last line, as is usual in such effusions, contains the enigma.

to have occurred to any one of the earlier commentators on the Bible, or students of nature, that the best way of dealing with the story of the unnatural conduct of the raven, might be to deny it altogether.

King Charles the First thought that the miracle of the ravens bringing food to Elijah, was made more miraculous by the character of the birds. "He made," he writes, "the greedy ravens to be the caterers of Elias, and to bring him food." The same thought seems to have occurred to Charles the First's great contemporary and antagonist, Milton; for while he describes in his own sonorous language, in *Paradise Regained*, the somewhat aldermanic feast which the "cook-fiend," as Lamb calls Satan, had provided for the Most Holy One, as a temptation in the wilderness, he also, with deep and reverential insight, hints at the simpler fare, "Nature's refreshment sweet," which presented itself, in His sleep, to the "temperate fantasies" of the famished Son of God.*

"Him thought He by the Brook of Cherith stood,
And saw the ravens with their horny beaks
Food to Elijah bringing, even and morn,
Tho' ravenous, taught to abstain from what they brought."

* See Lamb's Essays on "Grace before Meat," *Essays on Elia*, p. 126.

But it is the aged Adam, the ideal "faithful servant" in *As You Like It*, who, cheerfully giving up the five hundred crowns—all his savings, that is—lest his young master should come to want, best enters into the spirit of the Bible stories,—and may we not add into the essence of all true religion?—when, having divested himself of his last farthing, he prays thus :

"Take that, and He that doth the ravens feed,
Yea, providently caters for the sparrow,
Be comfort to my age !"

The raven, it is true, like some other birds which abound in affection for their young, will, for some inscrutable reason, sometimes regard the young bird which has fallen out of her nest, as out of her care. A hedge-sparrow, for instance, will leave her young ones which have been thrown out of her nest, one after the other, by the intruding cuckoo to die untended, and lie, as I have seen them myself, in a ghastly row beneath it, while she devotes the whole of her attention to the "overgrown step-child" which monopolises and fills it.

That the raven, however, does tend her young with the tenderest maternal care, while they are in the nest, and flies about with them, for weeks or months, after they are able to leave it, supplying all

their wants, I have proved repeatedly by my own experience. And the strength of her parental affection even for her eggs, may be shown by the pathetic story of "the Raven Tree" told by Gilbert White :

In the centre of Losel's grove there stood an oak, which, though shapely and tall on the whole, bulged out into a large excrescence about the middle of the stem. On this a pair of ravens had fixed their residence for such a series of years that the oak was distinguished by the title of the Raven Tree. Many were the attempts of the neighbouring youths to get at this eyrie ; the difficulty whetted their inclinations, and each was ambitious of surmounting the arduous task. But when they arrived at the swelling, it jutted out so in their way, and was so far beyond their grasp, that the most daring lads were awed, and acknowledged the undertaking to be too hazardous. So the ravens built on, nest upon nest, in perfect security, till the fatal day arrived in which the wood was to be levelled. It was in the month of February, when those birds usually sit. The saw was applied to the butt, the wedges were inserted into the opening, the woods echoed to the heavy blows of the beetle or the mallet, the tree nodded to its fall ; but still the daw sat on. At last, when it gave way, the bird was flung from her nest, and though her parental affection deserved a better fate, was whipped down by the twigs, which brought her dead to the ground,

If the raven has been a bird of evil repute, and has had a bad time of it in many parts of Europe, it has been quite otherwise in Scandinavia and its dependencies ; for, there, the raven was the sacred bird of Odin, who was "the war god, the inventor of letters, the guardian of roads and boundaries, the common Divinity of the whole conquering people, and one whom every tribe held to be the first ancestor of its kings" ; the god, moreover, whose name is, to this day, in the mouth of every one who has occasion to mention the day of the week named after him, Wednesday or "Wodin's day." In other words, while Odin was the Jupiter, the Mars, the Cadmus, the Terminus of the Scandinavian and Teutonic races all in one, the raven was his spy, his messenger, his pioneer, his minister for war, all in one. The banner of those "kings of the sea" was, itself, made in the shape of a raven ; and was so constructed that when a fresh breeze bellied it, it looked as if the bird was fluttering its wings for flight ; and, surely, no banner that was ever borne before a conquering host, not the Labarum of Constantine, not even the Crescent of the Saracens, nor the Cross of the Crusaders, nor the Oriflamme of the French, carried such terror with it, as did the raven of the Norsemen

among those on whom he was about to make his fatal swoop. Sometimes, the banner of a noted sea-king would be woven by his mother, with her own hands, with wondrous skill and under potent spells, which were destined, it was believed, to bring victory to his band of warriors, but death to him who bore it; and there were never wanting those who, like the Decii family at Rome, or the Japanese of the present day, were eager candidates for the post of honour and of fate.*

But the raven-standard did not always lead its followers to victory; and the capture of one such standard was a turning point in the fortunes of the English nation, and of the best and greatest of English kings. Ragnar Ludbrog, a famous sea-king, was believed to have been stung to death by serpents, in the dungeon of the Northumbrian king, Ælla, who had taken him prisoner. His sons swore to avenge him by conquering England; and his daughters managed to weave, in one noontide, the mysterious "Raefan" or raven-standard, which was to accompany them, and to help and to witness the conquest. Did it appear to flap its wings as they marched into battle, it was a sure omen of victory. Did the

* Dasent's *Story of Burnt Njal*, vol. i., p. 120.

wings hang listlessly by his side, it was a sure presage of defeat. The fortunes of Alfred the Great, were in that year, the year 898, at their very lowest. England had been reduced by the Danes to Wessex; and Wessex had shrunk to the Isle of Athelney. The first battle was fought in North Devon. Whether the raven flapped or drooped his wings, the Saxon Chronicle does not tell us; but 890 of the warriors who followed it were slain, and the raven-standard itself was captured. The good news put fresh heart into the faithful few who had clung to their king in his distress. He burst forth from his island fastness, and the capture of the raven-standard was soon followed by the crowning victory of Ethandun, by the surrender and baptism of Guthrum and his followers, and by the Peace of Wedmore. Wessex was saved, and, through Wessex, England.

Never, I suppose, was Europe in such evil plight as during that tenth century when the Magyars were harrying its central plains, the Saracens scouring its southern waters, and the Northmen, the most dreaded of them all, its northern coasts and islands. Well might Charles the Great himself, on hearing that the Norsemen had appeared on the Seine, burst into tears, not

because of the damage they had done—for they had disappeared, almost as soon as they had appeared—but because he foresaw the trouble they would cause, when his active brain no longer guided, and his strong hand no longer guarded, his vast dominions. Well might people hope that the end of the world was drawing near, in this, its thousandth year, and look forward to it as a deliverance, at all events, from the evils of the present. Things might be better; they could not well be worse, after the Great Assize. Well too might a new and lamentable petition be added to their solemn litanies :

"A furore Normannorum libera nos, Domine."

"From the raging of the Northmen, good Lord, deliver us."

"Woe to the realms which he coasted ! for there
Was shedding of blood and rending of hair ;
Rape of maiden and slaughter of priest,
Gathering of ravens and wolves to the feast :
Where he hoisted his standard black,
Before him was battle, behind him wrack ;
And he burned the churches, that heathen Dane,
To light his band to their barks again."

Hated before, the raven was doubly hated and feared now by the panic-stricken peoples whose coasts

"The Norsemen trained to spoil and blood,
Skilled to prepare the ravens food,"

were harrying and carrying. A certain sea-king, Owain, is said to have had an army of 300 ravens.

“And all around the shadowy kings
Denmark’s grim ravens cowered their wings.”

William the Conqueror, a descendant of the Vikings, and, in a sense, himself the greatest and most terrible of them all, may be seen to this day on the tapestry of Bayeux, entering into the battle which was to give him his crowning victory at Senlac, behind the sacred raven-standard.

The title which Odin most valued after that of the “All-Father,” father of gods as well as men, was “Hrafna-gwd” or the “Ravens god.” Two pet ravens, in particular, he had, Hugen and Munen, “Mind and Memory”—“the eyes of the king” the Greeks and the Persians might have called such trusted officials—which he let loose, every morning, to collect intelligence as to what was going on in the world; and which, on returning in the evening, perched upon his shoulder and whispered in his ear whatever news they had to tell. But their fidelity was not always equal to their intelligence. The raven had not proved a trusty messenger when sent out of the Ark by Noah. He had not

always done his duty when sent out by Apollo, his patron god ; and Odin was always anxious lest his messengers should fail to return. So proverbial, indeed, did the raven, afterwards, become as a "bad messenger," that when one of the chieftains, in the first Crusade, was sent back to Paris on an important mission, and slunk off home, instead of coming back to the army, he was held up to scorn, by one of the historians of the Crusade, as an "ambassador of the raven type": "*Corvini generis legatus postea non rediit.*"

But ravens were more than the messengers of the god, they were the pilots, the pioneers, the discoverers of the race. A pair of them were generally taken by a sea-king in his vessel, and when the stars quite failed to show where he was, they acted the part of a compass for him. He let them loose and, marking the direction which they took, followed, as best he could, in their wake, sure that they were taking the shortest way to land. On one occasion, they made a great geographical discovery. Flokki, a famous sea-rover, fitted out an expedition to test the truth of reports brought by other sea-rovers, that there was a large island somewhere, an "ultima Thule," far beyond even the Faröes. He took three ravens with him which

were, first, solemnly consecrated to the gods. He reached the Faröes, and striking boldly out to sea beyond, let loose raven No. 1, which, after rising high in air, returned to the islands, whence Flokki concluded that they were still the nearest land. He sailed onward again, and let slip raven No. 2, which, after circling round for a time, returned to the ship; whence Flokki concluded that there was now no land within even a raven's sight or scent. He sailed onward once more, and then let loose No. 3, his forlorn hope. It flew off at once north-westward. Flokki followed in his wake, and discovered the eastern coast of a huge inhospitable island, which he named Iceland.* Soon afterwards, the Northmen came to settle in the newly-discovered country. It became the home of the Scalds and the birthplace of the Sagas. And the adventurous Northmen, sallying forth thence again, in process of time, and doubtless accompanied and guided by the ravens, who were inseparable from them, discovered a still more remote and inhospitable island, which they named Vinland or Greenland.

* Mallet's *Northern Antiquities*, p. 107.

CHAPTER IV

THE RAVEN—PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

My intimate personal acquaintance with the raven dates from 1855, nearly half a century ago, when I was a boy of fifteen years old, at Milton Abbas School, Blandford. The circumstances may be worth relating. I had for some years been fond of birds, in a rather truer sense than that in which Tom Tulliver was "fond of them—fond, that is, of throwing stones at them." Some six miles from Blandford, between it and Wimborne, at the end of a stretch of open down, and near the park of Kingston Lacy, there stands, on high ground, a noble clump of Scotch firs, younger and smaller trees outside, older and bigger within. Round the clump run several concentric circles of fosse and rampart, the work of bygone races, British, Roman, or Saxon, which give to the whole

the name of "Badbury Rings." There, from time immemorial, so tradition said, a pair of ravens had reared their young, and many attempts had been made without success to reach their eyrie. The trees selected were too big in girth to swarm, and the lower branches, for forty feet upward, had disappeared. The raven, I knew, was the earliest of all birds to breed, earlier, by some weeks, than the rook and the heron, which are the next to follow it.

It was the 24th of February, and the snow lay thick on the ground. When school was over at noon, I applied for leave to go to Badbury Rings. My good master, the Rev. J. Penny, after a decent show of objection—"the snow was so deep that we could never get there," "the tree so hard that we should never be able to climb it," "the season so backward that no sensible raven would be thinking of laying her eggs yet"—gave me the necessary permission. I was accompanied by J. H. Taylor, now of Trinity College, Cambridge. We bought a hammer and a packet of the largest nails we could get, some sixty in number, and some ten inches long, and we set out on our expedition; but, what with the weight of the nails and hammer, and the depth of the snow, and our losing our way, for a time, near the half-way village of Spetisbury,



BADBURY RINGS.

From a Drawing by Josephine Blundell.



we did not arrive till half-past three o'clock. As we approached, we heard, to our delight, the croak of the ravens, and saw them soaring above the clump or wheeling round it, in the pursuit of one another. We entered the clump. There were two or three raven-like looking nests, apparently of bygone years, and we did not want to assail the wrong one; so we crouched down and watched till we saw, or thought we saw, the raven go into one of them. Creeping up, we gave the tree a smart tap and out the bird flew; but as birds often go into their nests and "think about it," some days before they lay in them, we did not feel over-sanguine as to its contents.

The tree was just what we had expected, and there was nothing to be done but to go at it, hammer and nails. It was a task of delicacy and difficulty, not to say of danger: to lean with one foot the whole of one's weight upon a nail, which might have a flaw in it, or might not have been driven far enough into the tree; to cling with one arm, as far as it would reach, round the bole, and, with the other, to hold both nail and hammer, and to coax the former into the tree with very gentle blows — for a heavy blow would at once have overbalanced me — and then to climb one step

upwards and repeat the process over and over again. The old birds, meanwhile, kept flying closely round, croaking and barking fiercely, with every feather, on neck and head, erect in anger, and often pitching in a tree close by. It was well that they did not make-believe actually to attack me; for the slightest movement on my part to ward them off must have thrown me to the ground. In spite of the exertion, my hands and body were numbed with the cold. I had taken up as many nails as I could carry, some six or seven in a tin box tied round my waist, and let it down with a string, from time to time, to get it refilled by my companion. As I climbed higher, the work grew more dangerous, for the wind told more; and a slip would now not only have thrown me to the ground, but have torn me to pieces with the nails which thickly studded the trunk below. At last, the first branch, some fifty feet from the ground, as measured by the string, was reached, and the rest was easy.

There are few moments more exciting to an enthusiastic bird's-nester than is the moment before he looks into a nest, which he has had much difficulty in reaching, and which may or may not contain a rare treasure. One can almost hear one's

heart beat ; and "to my inexpressible delight," if I may quote the phrase I find that I used in my diary for that night, my first glance revealed that the nest contained four eggs. It had taken me two and a half hours to attain to them. Two of the eggs are still in my possession. They are speckled all over with grey and green, twice the size of a rook's egg, and perhaps a third larger than a crow's ; and if the value which one puts upon a thing depends very much, as I suppose it does, on what it has cost one to get it, I have the right to regard them as among my most treasured possessions. The nest was a huge structure, nearly as big as a heron's, but built of larger sticks and better put together. The eggs lay in a deep and comfortable hollow, lined with fibres, grass, dry bracken, a few feathers, some rabbits' fur, and, strangest of all, a large portion of a woman's dress, probably a gipsy's, for in those days, gipsy encampments were common thereabouts. The descent would have been comparatively easy, except for the darkness, which had come on apace, and made it difficult to find the nails. We did not reach Blandford till nine o'clock P.M., worn out with cold, hunger, and fatigue, but proud in the possession of the first raven's eggs I had ever seen.

It is a curious coincidence that, in the very same year 1903, in which I wrote the first draft of this account, Mr W. H. Hudson, the noted naturalist of the Pampas, when wandering, as is his wont, through out-of-the-way parts of the country, observing birds, should have happened to be at Sixpenny Hanley, on the edge of the county of Dorset, where he had never been before, and should have asked, as is also his wont, a countryman in the fields, about the birds of the neighbourhood, and, in particular, whether a raven was ever heard or seen there. "Not often now," replied the labourer, "but look over yonder"—and he pointed to Badbury Rings, many miles away—"a pair of ravens did always used to bide and build there;" and he went on to tell him how, many years ago, when quite a young man, he had determined, one day, to go over and try to get the young ravens. He had only a bit of bread and cheese in his pocket, and when he got there, very tired, he found that the tree containing the nest was "stuck all over with big spikes, which made it impossible for him to climb it," and he had returned, disappointed and exhausted. The "big spikes" which—perhaps conjoined with his own exhaustion and the terrors of the raven's croaking—had made it impossible for him to climb

the tree, were, doubtless, the very nails which alone had enabled me—or could have enabled any one—a few weeks, or a few years before, to climb it.

It may add a touch of interest to the story to mention that Badbury Rings is identified by Dr Guest with Mount Badon, the scene of the great victory of King Arthur, the national hero of the Britons, over the West Saxons, which delayed the course of their invasion for some thirty years; and it adds still another touch of interest to record that there is a version of the “Passing of Arthur” which must have been unknown, I think, even to Lord Tennyson. The immortal knight of La Mancha, Don Quixote himself, tells us that King Arthur did not die, but was changed by witchcraft into a raven; that the day is still to come when he will assume his former shape and claim his former rights; and that, since that time, no Englishman—would that it were true—has ever been known to kill a raven, for fear lest he should kill King Arthur! What place could be more appropriate for King Arthur to haunt, during his inter-vital state, than the scene of his great victory, Badbury Rings? Long may he haunt it! The raven has continued to build, with few intermissions, every year since 1856, either at Badbury Rings

or in the adjoining park of Kingston Lacy, safe under the protection of its owner, Mr Ralph Bankes, who will, doubtless, be doubly anxious to protect it now, when he is assured on the authority of no less a person than Don Quixote himself, that the violent death of a raven on his estate may involve not only—as it has long been held, in the neighbourhood, to do—a loss to his family, but also a loss to the nation at large.

The great German Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa, who was drowned while on the Third Crusade, in a little river in Cilicia, was believed, for centuries, by his subjects not to have died at all, but, like King Arthur, only to have “passed,” and to be sleeping in a cave in the mountains, whence his red beard could occasionally be seen flashing through the mist, waiting till it should be time for him to awake and give unity to distracted Germany. Prince Bismarck has done his work for him ; and I do not suppose that his sleep will, ever now, be disturbed. But one incident of the legend must be recorded here. He wakes from time to time, and asks sleepily “whether the ravens are still flying round the mountain.” The answer is, that they are still flying there ; and the great Emperor sighs and goes to sleep again,

considering that the time for his resurrection has not yet come.

My other ravens' nests I must dismiss more briefly. The next which I found was, two years later, in Savernake Forest, while I was at school at Marlborough. Savernake Forest, take it all in all, is the finest bit of woodland scenery in England, and a very paradise of birds. A paradise and a sanctuary it would be in one, if it were not for the near neighbourhood of so many hundred boys. Of this, however, I should be the last to complain, seeing that nearly every spare hour of my three years at school was passed within it. It has every species of game from herds of red and fallow deer to pheasants, partridges, and rabbits; and, what is more to my purpose to remark, it is also the happy home—as so many wild tracks of woodland and noble parks might still be in England—of large numbers of interesting birds of prey, the sparrow and the kestrel hawk, the white owl and the brown owl, the crow and the magpie. With jays and jackdaws it literally swarms. Its primæval oaks or beeches, as they gradually decay, afford easy boring and nesting room for every species of climbing bird, the woodpecker, green and spotted, the nuthatch, the wryneck, and the tree-creeper. The

kingfisher I have known to build in its marlpits two miles from running water ; while small birds which are not common in other parts of England, except in specially favoured spots, such as the wood wren, the redstart, and the hawfinch, are not uncommon there. All that seemed requisite to crown its sylvan glories was a raven and a raven's nest. Vague rumours, indeed, had reached me that a stray raven had occasionally been heard or seen within the forest ; but, in all my wanderings hitherto, I had seen or heard nothing of it myself. I started, on a somewhat forlorn hope, with my friend, now Sir Robert Collins, on the 11th of March 1859 ; and as we neared a clump of splendid silver firs towards the far end of the forest, beyond the reach of the ordinary bird's-nester, we heard the croak of a raven, saw it flying, and found its nest. It contained five eggs, which, in due time, were safely hatched. For how many years before this the ravens had been building there, and how many years afterwards they continued to do so, I know not. I only know that they are not there now.

The next nest was in quite a different, but in an equally ideal place, near my own home at West Stafford. It was in a wood of old Scotch firs on Knighton Heath, the same of which I spoke, in the



RAVEN TARN.

From a Sketch by Lorna Bosworth Smith.



first chapter, as having, within my own knowledge, been the home, for nearly half a century, of a pair of long-eared owls. It is the outpost, as it were, of that large expanse, of wild moorland and woodland—brightened, in springtime, by brakes of gorse and broom and hawthorn, and intersected by quaking bogs, fragrant with bog myrtle, and, in autumn, often rich in colour with sun-dew, and asphodel, and the flowering rush, and the dark blue bog gentian—which begins with Knighton or with Yellowham Wood, and stretches away, with few intermissions, by Wareham, Poole, and Christchurch, through the New Forest, and so right on to Woking or Bagshot. The nearer part of this wild country, it may interest many to know, is that which has been made famous by the genius of Mr Thomas Hardy, under the name of Egdon Heath.

The tree was the biggest in the wood, looking out upon the Heath ; and, a few yards below it, was a “silent pool,” half overgrown with grass and rushes, to which we gave thereafter the name of Raven Tarn.

“The coot was swimming in the reedy pond,
Beside the water-hen—so soon affrighted ;
And in the weedy moat the heron, fond
Of solitude, alighted.

“The moping heron, motionless and stiff,
That on a stone, as silently and stilly,
Stood, an apparent sentinel, as if
To guard the water-lily.”

And now, the presence of the raven made the eeriness of the place complete, and for four months in each of the next five years—in January, when the old birds began to repair their nest ; in February, when the eggs were laid ; in March, when the young birds were hatched ; and in April, when already dressed in their complete and final plumage, they were beginning to find their wings—I was able, from time to time, to watch the progress made, and put to the proof the solicitude of the parent birds for each other and for their young, to admire their aërial movements, and to listen to the curiously varied intonations of their deep-voiced throats. The augurs and necromancers of old are said to have distinguished sixty-five intonations of the raven's voice—a wide field for augural science or chicanery ; but there are quite enough varieties—his croak, his bark, his grunt, his chuckle—to attract the ear and call for close attention. There are few birds whose movements are so varied and so graceful, especially when the nest is preparing and the cares of motherhood have not yet begun. They will toy with one

another in mid-air, and often tumble down a fathom or two, as if shot, or turn right over on their backs, in sheer merriment. When the wind is high, the "tempest-loving" birds shoot up in the air like a rocket or a towering partridge to an immense height, and then, by closing their wings, drop, in a series of rapid jerks or plunges, which they can check at pleasure, down to the ground. The male raven, while his mate is sitting, keeps anxious watch over her, and croaks savagely when any one approaches, or sallies forth, in eager tournament, against any rook, or crow, or hawk, or larger bird of prey which intrudes on his domains. If you can manage to evade his watchful eye, and enter the wood unobserved, you can, sometimes, lie down quite still, in sight of the nest and note all that is going on. You will see him perch on the very top of an adjoining fir-tree, or whet his beak, as he is fond of doing, against one of its branches, or fiercely tear off others and drop them below. You will hear him utter a low gurgling note of conjugal endearment, which will, sometimes, lure his mate from her charge; and then, after a little coze and talk together, you will see him, unlike many husbands, relieve her, for the time, of her responsibilities, and take his own turn upon the nest.

The raven always pairs for life, and the strength of affection, the fidelity, the dignity which this implies seem to me to raise him indefinitely, as it does the owls, above birds which congregate in flocks, and so, presumably, abjure family ties and duties throughout a great part of the year. Still more does he rise above birds which choose a new mate with each new love season, or which, like the daintily-stepping cock-pheasant or the magnificent; but singularly selfish black cock, are polygamous by nature, and summon with a lordly crow, or cluck, or call, now one, and now another, of their humble-looking wives or drudges, to their presence.

The young ravens, long before they leave the nest, are, except in strength of leg or wing, completely developed both in colour and in form; while birds of lower orders have to pass through a long apprenticeship, before they can be said to be perfect in either. A young robin or a young thrush remains in appearance, a young robin or a young thrush for many weeks after it has left the nest; while birds like the harrier, the gull, the gannet, the great northern diver go, for years, through a very kaleidoscope of changes, before they can be pronounced to have come of full age. And it is on this early maturity of the raven, as well as on his



YOUNG RAVENS.



high physical and intellectual development, that Professor A. Newton and others rely, when they place him at the top of the ornithological tree.

The last raven's nest in which I was specially interested was further within the heath country, on the Moreton estate, belonging to Mr Frampton,—an estate which, by its extent and its beauty, by its clear streams, by its big fir plantations and its clumps of high trees on isolated knolls, dispersed over the heather, is calculated to attract not only wading and swimming birds which abound there,—but also birds of prey, and, above all, the king of birds, the raven. I was walking home to Stafford Rectory, late one evening, early in April, regretting that no raven was now to be seen at Raven Tarn, or in the whole neighbourhood, when I heard one single low note which I felt sure must be that of a raven. I looked up, and could just see him flying very high in air, inward from the sea, and going, as hard as he could go, towards Moreton. I watched him out of sight, making, as it seemed to me, right for a clump of fir trees, on a conical hill called Millicent, some five or six miles “as the crow,” or as, I ought to say in this instance, “the raven flies”; and I was convinced that, at that time of the evening, he must be going straight to

his home, and that, at that time of the year, his home must be his nest and his little ones. Next day, I followed, as nearly as I could, in his viewless track, and there, in the biggest tree of the clump and looking over a wide swamp, was the raven's nest, and in it five fully-fledged young birds. It was the most successful stalk that I had ever had in bird's-nesting. I managed to bring one of the young ravens safely down in a handkerchief, in my teeth; and, for seventeen years afterwards, it remained one of the most delightful of our pets and most amusing of our companions at Harrow.

Is it true or not true—a curious and current belief—that the raven lives to an immense age, some say to a hundred or even to three hundred or more years? Old Hesiod is the father of the belief, and he is supported, more or less, by a host of ancient writers, the elder Pliny, Cicero, Aristophanes, Horace, Ovid, and Ausonius. Popular opinion, in modern times, quite agrees with them, as expressed in the Highland proverb, somewhat modified from Hesiod:

“Thrice the life of a dog is the life of a horse,
Thrice the life of a horse is the life of a man,
Thrice the life of a man is the life of a stag,
Thrice the life of a stag is the life of a raven.”

"Thin is thy plumage, death is in thy croak ;
Raven, come down from that majestic oak,"

cries one, half in terror, half in make-believe contempt, when he sees and hears the bird of destiny athwart his path. But the raven, with sublime Promethean scorn for the creature of the day who dares so to accost him, thus replies :

"When *I* was hatched my father set this tree,
An acorn then : its fall I hope to see
A century after *thou* hast ceased to be."

There cannot be so much smoke without some fire behind it ; and I am inclined to think that a raven does live to a very great age for a bird ; and that Horace's epithet for the raven, "*annosus*," and Tennyson's "*many-wintered crow*" are justified by facts. But the belief in its extreme age rests, I suspect, on one of its most touching characteristics, its intense hereditary attachment to the spot, a particular cliff, a particular grove, a particular tree, where its ancestors, where itself, and where its young have been born and bred. The most striking instance that has come within my own knowledge was at the home of my grandfather, the Down House, Blandford. In a fine clump of beeches, in the middle of a plantation named Littlewood, a raven used

to build, year after year. Year after year, the hen bird was shot upon the nest by an insensate gamekeeper ; and, year after year, the male bird came back, with a new mate, to share her predecessor's fate ; at last, the male bird was shot as well, and the gamekeeper thought that he had done with them for ever. But a fresh pair, doubtless birds of the same stock which had been hatched there safely, before the reign of the bloodthirsty gamekeeper had begun, came, next year, and shared the same fate. Since then, the place knows them no more.

The same spirit of local attachment, I have repeatedly observed, brings a pair of ravens, which, for some reason or other, have forsaken a former home, to revisit it. Flying high in air over it, they drop, as it were, from the clouds upon it, perch upon their favourite trees, and outdo themselves, while there, in their garrulity, chattering, as is probable in so intensely conservative a bird, if not of Elijah and of Odin, at all events of the good old times which they have themselves known. Now it is probable, I think, that it is this local attachment of a pair of ravens to a particular wood or tree which has given rise to the belief that the raven is a very Nestor among birds, a Nestor in age, as well as in wisdom and eloquence. Two or three generations

ago, a "raven-tree," "the pest or the pride of the village," it might be called, according to the point of view, could be pointed out in many spots, in almost every county in England. The oldest inhabitant, a man perhaps of eighty or ninety years of age, could not "mind" the time, nor his father before him, no, nor his father again before him, he would say with honest pride, when "the raven" was not there. The bird must therefore be not only much older than himself; but as old, probably, as his grandfather, his father, and himself put together! *

A few words about the raven as a pet. No bird, I think, is his equal in this capacity, whether we look at his intense sociability, his queer secretiveness, his powers of mimicry, his inexhaustible store of fun and mischief. You have never got to the bottom of him. He is always learning something fresh. No bird has a more elaborate development of the vocal organs, and no bird, not even a parrot, makes more use of them. He will catch up any sound which takes his fancy, from his own name Ralph, or Grip, or Jacob, to a short sentence; and the latter he will practise, with only a few "flashes of silence," by the hour together. His voice is so human that it has often been mistaken for a man's.

* See Appendix on the age of the raven (p. 419).

Anecdotes about him abound. Here is a sample of one or two of them. One raven, kept near the guard-house at Chatham, managed, more than once, to "turn out," the guard, who thought they were summoned by the sentinel on duty. Another, the favourite of a regiment, of which I used to hear much when I was young, would walk demurely on to the parade-ground, take his place by the side of the commanding officer, and, in defiance of military discipline, repeat, with appropriate intonations, each word of command. The stable-yard of a country inn, in the olden time, a brewer's yard, in more recent times, used to form an excellent "school for scandal" for a pet raven, who would not only learn to imitate all the sounds made by all the animals or birds which frequented the spot, but would pick up "stable language" or "brewing language" with a somewhat objectionable facility. One raven, kept at the "Elephant and Castle," when that famous hostelry was the resort of four-horse coaches rather than of omnibuses, would take his place in a outward-bound coach, the observed of all observers, by the side of a coachman who had won his heart, and then return, in a homeward-bound coach, which he met on the road, by the side of another favourite Jehu. Another raven, kept at the "Old Bear" inn

at Hungerford, struck up a close friendship with a Newfoundland dog. When the dog broke his leg the raven waited on him constantly, catered for him, forgetting, for the time, his own greediness, and rarely, if ever, left his side. One night, when his friend was, by accident, shut within the stable alone, Ralph succeeded in pecking a hole through the door, all but large enough to admit his body. Another raven, kept in a yard, in which a big basket sparrow-trap was sometimes set, watched narrowly the process from his favourite corner, and managed, when the trap fell, to lift it up, hoping to get at the sparrows within. They, of course, escaped before he could drop the trap. But, taught by experience, he opened communications with another tame raven in an adjoining yard, and the next time the trap fell, while one of them lifted it up, the other pounced upon the quarry. Wild ravens have, in like manner, been observed, upon occasion, to hunt their prey in couples. In ancient times, an Asiatic Greek, named Craterus, used to take his tame ravens out hunting with him, perched, like the falcons of more modern times, on the hunting horns, or the shoulders of his attendants; and they were trained to find his prey for him in the coverts, as well as to harry it when found.

A correspondent, Mr J. Sherwell, tells me that

he was, for some years, well acquainted with a fine raven, which was the property of a shoemaker at March, a town in Cambridgeshire. It had the free run of the streets, and could hold its own, and more than its own, against all the cats and dogs he met. When the children were leaving their various schools in the town, if he saw a batch of girls coming towards him, who, as their gentler nature prompted them, were in the habit of treating him well, he would make straight for the pump and wait for them to give him a shower bath, which he received with every demonstration of delight. If, on the other hand, he saw a group of boys coming, who, after the manner of their kind, would throw stones at, or otherwise molest him, he would invariably make for a particular window-sill, and mutely dare them to throw a stone at him and so break the window. He had evidently got to know, somehow or other, that a window was a place of safety, even in the sight of street boys. A tame raven, in ancient Rome, must have gone through a similar process of reasoning or what is akin to it, when, in a time of great heat and drought, being unable to reach the water in a small tank or basin placed near a tomb, for birds to drink from—just as the Muslims, in North Africa and other Eastern countries, place

bird-tanks near their mosques or marabouts—and realising, what so many tame ravens since, one of my own amongst them, have failed to realise, that he would be drowned if he fell into it, was observed bringing stone after stone and dropping them into the basin, till the water rose sufficiently for him to be able to quench his thirst from it, in safety.

The strange story of yet another raven I owe, in outline, to Mr John Digby, of the Middle Temple, who got it from his friend, the owner, and himself saw much of what he relates. A female raven, known, at that time, to be sixty years of age, and who had passed much of her early and middle life with a strange companion, a blind porcupine, was given, in the year 1854, by Mr J. H. Gurney, the well-known ornithologist, to the rector of Bluntisham in Huntingdonshire. The bird seemed so disconsolate at the loss of her old surroundings, that her new owner, failing to get another raven, managed to obtain a seagull as her companion. A warm friendship soon sprang up between the two birds. They followed one another about everywhere, and the raven would often treat her companion to pieces of putrid meat which she had buried, for her private consumption, in the shrubberies. These were delicacies in the eyes of the raven, but they

were not so good for the gull. In course of time whether from indigestion or not, the gull fell ill and the raven became more assiduous than ever in her attentions, never leaving him, and plying him with her most nauseous tit-bits. The gull grew worse, as was, perhaps, natural under the treatment, and less companionable; and, one day, when he positively refused to touch a more unsavoury morsel than usual which the raven had denied to herself, and, doubtless, thought to be a panacea, the bird, in a fit of fury at the ingratitude of her friend and patient, fell upon and killed him, tore his body to pieces, and, burying half of it for future consumption, devoured the rest!

We know little enough of our own hearts, still less of one another's; but how infinitively less do we know of the animals who are our most constant companions, least of all, of our pet birds! Such intense affection, followed by such uncontrollable rage at a fancied slight, one may have known in man, but who would expect it in a raven? Was it a reversion to type, to original savagery, just as a Negro, apparently civilised and Christianised, has been known, on returning to the Niger coast, to go back, within a year, to his human sacrifices and his cannibalism; or as the Fuegians, described

by Darwin, who, after a long visit to England, reverted, after their return to their native land, to their old customs, the eating of putrid whale blubber, and the suffocating of their old women? Or again, was it a crowning proof of love, such as is given by some animals to their young, when they think they can save them in no other way, or by such savages as those described by Herodotus, who thought it was a sign of the basest ingratitude *not* to kill and eat their aged parents? We know not; but any bird which has a nature so inscrutable, so passion-ravaged, capable of such fierce extremes and such violent revulsions of feeling, possesses a personality of its own, and has that within it, from which a whole Greek tragedy, nay, a second Medea, might be well evolved.

It should be added, to make the story complete, that the bird was still living in 1874. She had long since built a nest upon the ground, which she industriously repaired from year to year, lining it with the hair she managed to extract from the body of a terrier friend, when he was fast asleep, and always showing a special preference for the soft down which grew inside his ears. The raven, indeed, had a rare time of it, whenever the terrier was bent on sleep. As he

lay with his fore paws tucked in under his body, but with tail stretched out, the raven would give it a smart nip from behind. When the dog lifted his body in order to tuck his tail in and so get it out of danger, out would come his fore paws. Round hopped the raven and gave his attention to them; and the same process would be repeated over and over again, till the teaser had had enough of it, or the terrier ran away elsewhere, to have his sleep out. She was never known to lay an egg in the nest she had so long prepared, till, one day, it occurred to one of the servants, out of mere curiosity to see what she would do, to drop a hen's egg into it. She promptly ate it, and, pleased with the delicacy, began, at the mature age of eighty, to lay eggs herself, which she always incontinently devoured.

Of course, a tame raven is an arrant thief, and if you let him run loose, you must expect to pay for your amusement. Anything bright especially attracts him. A butler who had lost spoon after spoon, and had thrown the blame upon every one but the real offender, at last saw Ralph with the proverbial "silver spoon in his mouth," watched him sneak off to the hole which served him for a savings bank, and found therein not only the spoon which he had missed, but others which he

had not. The bank, on this occasion, paid compound interest on the deposit.

One of my own tame ravens, a native of Raven Tarn, had the run of a stable-yard, of a garden, and of a field—in fact, pretty well also of the whole of the adjoining village of Stafford; and no small boy, home for the holidays, for the first time, from school, could prove a greater imp of mischief than he. He led the pigeons, the ducks, and the hens of the stable-yard a sad life; but he gave the cocks a wide berth, except when they were busy fighting, and then he would attack them, in safety and with perfect impartiality, from the rear. When a favourite cat was walking demurely and daintily across the yard, Jacob, with a few quiet sidelong hops, would come up behind—his head on one side, as always, when meditating mischief—would give her a sharp nip in the tail, and testify his delight at the panic he had created by a loud croak. He had private stores everywhere of sticks, bones, buttons, nails, thimbles, and even halfpence, some of which were not discovered till after his death, and then chiefly by his namesake, and successor, and residuary legatee. If you ever noticed him putting on a particularly *nonchalant* air, you might be quite sure he had

some stolen treasure in his mouth which he was particularly anxious to stow away unobserved. He was the friend of every one in the village, but the marplot of all who had any work to do in it. Did he see the gardener bedding out, with especial care, any plant, he would select it for his especial attention, as soon as the gardener's back was turned. Did he see a labourer in the allotment "setting" a row of his beans, as soon as he was gone, the raven would follow in his footsteps, dig them up, one by one, and drop them, one on the top of another, into a hole of his own. Did a well-dressed man, something perhaps of a dandy, drop a new lilac kid glove, the raven would be off with it in a moment, dodge all his pursuers, and, the moment the pursuit slackened, would begin to pick it to pieces and would continue his work, each time the pursuers halted for breath, till it was a thing of shreds and tatters. He would follow me about for a walk of a mile or so; and if he happened to meet a dog, there was a great show of excitement and fury on both sides; but each had too much regard for his own safety to come to close quarters. It was a case of *cave corvum* quite as much as of *cave canem*.

Most villages in Dorset—as is, I suppose, the

case in other counties—have at least one happy or unhappy imbecile, living among them who—such is the kindness of the people—is almost always the village pet rather than the village butt. The raven soon detected the weakness of the Stafford imbecile, and would demonstrate around him, and make vigorous attacks on his legs whenever he passed through the yard. He showed similar insight and contempt for intellectual weakness, when I kept him, for a term or two, in the gardens of Trinity College, Oxford. The son of the gardener, who helped his father in the more mechanical part of his work, happened not to be strong in his mind. The raven instantly recognised the difference between the two men, and while he never molested the father in his work, he never left the son alone in his. Sometimes, he would fly up to my window, while I was giving a lecture, it may be on some Greek play, to my pupils, and would interpolate remarks which, if they were a sore interruption to the lecture, seemed often quite as much to the point as some of the remarks of the Chorus, through which we were painfully labouring. He was quite impervious to rain or frost or snow. When the snow was deep on the ground, he would play in it or roll over in it like a dog. He chose for his roosting-place at

Stafford the ridge of a thatched wall in a very exposed place in the allotments, and stuck to it through all weathers. Pets usually come to a sad or premature end. Waterton's pet raven, Marco, perished from a blow of one of his best friends, an angry coachman, on whom, in a moment of play or of excitement, he had inflicted a sharp nip. So sharp and strong is a raven's beak that he can hardly ever touch the hand without bringing blood and cutting rather deep. Dickens's pet raven, "Grip," developed an "unfortunate taste for white paint and putty," and died of the slow poison, as is narrated in Dickens's own preface to *Barnaby Rudge* and, at greater length, in his "Life" by Forster. My pet raven, "Jacob," met with the most ignominious and unworthy fate of all. He either walked or slipped into a barrel of liquid pigs'-wash and was found by me therein. An open verdict of "found drowned" was all that could be said about him.

Another of my pet ravens, the native of Millicent Clump, could not be allowed such unfettered liberty at Harrow, as he might have had in his native air of Dorset. He was kept in a large aviary where, if his opportunities for mischief were less, his progress in language was greater. His own name, "Jacob,"

and that of the gardener, "Holloway," he would repeat in half a dozen different tones. "Come on" he would say, now in a commanding, now in a hectoring, now in a persuasive tone, and, now again in the most confidential of whispers. This last was a great effort. He would bend his body right down to the perch on which he stood, open his wings, and every feather in his body would stand erect or would move in sympathy with it. But his pleasure was in proportion to his pain. He loved, as a clever parrot does, to call forth a peal of laughter; and though he could not laugh himself—it was almost the only human achievement that he did not attempt—his eye showed that he knew all about it. "How's that?" "Out," was a question and answer which he picked up for himself from a cricket-yard at some little distance. A bad cough, which I had, he managed to imitate so well that people who passed down the adjoining lane, thought it inconsiderate of me to expose a gardener who had such a hacking cough, to all weathers in my garden. He was a capital "catch." Blackberries thrown to him—as boys throw a ball to one another when practising themselves at "catch"—he would manage to intercept, whether thrown high or low, quickly or slowly, from his central perch, by a

dexterous movement of his neck and beak, without ever shifting his position, and hardly ever missing one, even on its rebound, when thrown against the opposite wall of the cage. Morsels of food given to him he would pack, one after the other, into the expansive skin of his lower mandible, till it was puffed out like a pouch ; and he then would look at you with a queer and knowing "where-are-they-all-gone-to?" sort of expression. When he had given you time to guess, he would gravely reproduce them, one after the other, and proceed to hide them in various parts of his cage, patting them down under sand or stones or rubbish of any kind, and then again would disinter them, as quickly as children do a doll which they have buried in their play, with a genuine *εύρηκα* look. The key of his cage-door, if it were left open by chance, he would whip out in a moment, and hide it in his very best hiding-place, and visibly enjoy the trouble he gave you in looking for it. He pecked a small hole into the next compartment of the aviary, in which I kept, sometimes an eagle owl, sometimes a kestrel hawk ; and it was his supreme delight to filch away a bit of food which the owl or the kestrel, in their comparative stupidity, sometimes left near it. One day, the kestrel, in a moment of forgetfulness, came

too near the hole. The raven caught him by the leg ; and it was soon all over with him.

One more appeal, as in the case of the owls, to those who love, or who are capable of loving, what is wild in nature, and I have done. Cicero tells us that, after the wholesale plunderings of Verres in Sicily, the duty of the guide who took you over a town which had formerly abounded in the richest treasures of Greek art, was no longer to show you those treasures, but only mournfully to point to the places in which they had once been. So is it with the ravens. The "oldest inhabitant" of a village here and there may still point, with pride and pleasure, to a "raven clump" or a "raven tree"; but where now are the ravens? Sir Thomas Browne, writing of ravens in Norfolk, two hundred years ago, said, "Ravens are in great plenty near Norwich ; and it is on this account that there are so few kites there." And, as late as 1829, another observer in Norfolk says, "This bird is found in woods *in every part of the county*." * To-day, there are none at all. They have followed the way of the kite. Mr Hudson was told by the old head keeper on the forest of Exmoor where ravens, surely, could do little harm, that, a quarter of a century ago, he trapped

* *Birds of Norfolk*, by H. Stevenson, p. 257.

fifty-two ravens in one year. What wonder that now there is hardly one to be heard there? In Dorset, besides those spots which I have known, in my own time, to be tenanted and afterwards abandoned by ravens, I have ascertained that, a generation or two ago, they still built in Sherborne Park, in one of the noble Scotch fir-trees planted there by Pope, and in Bryanston Park, on Rempston Heath and on Bloxworth Heath, in Came Park and on Galton Common, at Milton Abbey and at Buckland Newton, in the Coombe of Houghton and the Coombe of Bingham's Melcombe, and—perhaps the most fitting place of all—on the ruins of Corfe Castle, just as they once built on Glastonbury Tor, in the adjoining county of Somerset. What would not Corfe Castle and Glastonbury Tor gain in impressiveness, if there were ravens there still? If only they were to be strictly protected, as they always have been at Badbury Rings, they might, owing to that strong hereditary local attachment which I have described, be, even now, drawn back to some of their ancestral homes.

The “Ravenswoods,” “Ravensburghs,” “Ravenscrofts,” found, here and there, all over the country, bear the indubitable testimony of language to the large number of ravens which must in old

times have been found throughout England, and to the attention which so remarkable a bird could always command. Ramsbury in Wiltshire, I would remark, one of the original seats of the Bishopric—Sherborne being the other—which now has its throne at Salisbury, is nothing else than “Ravensbury,” “the town of the ravens,” as is shown by the fact that the Anglo-Saxons Latinised the name into “*Corvinum*” and that the bishop used to sign himself *Episcopus Corvinensis*, or “Bishop of Ravens.” The Bishop of Salisbury, therefore, looking to the origin of his see, as well as to the number of ravens which are still happily to be found on the coast, in the Dorsetshire part of his diocese, especially round Lulworth, has, I imagine, almost as good a right to be called the “Bishop of Ravens,” as the bishop of the quail-haunted Isle of Capri, who once derived a considerable revenue from them, had to be called the “Bishop of Quails.”

“The raven,” says the author of *Birds of Wiltshire*,* “is no mean ornament of a park, and speaks of a wide domain, and large timber, and an ancient family; for it is an aristocratic bird and cannot brook a confined property and trees of young growth. Would that its predilection were

* Quoted by Mr Hudson in his *Birds and Man*, p. 119.

more humoured and a secure retreat allowed by the larger proprietors on the land." The great landowner is, in my opinion, not so much to blame, except for the easy-going *laissez faire* which allows him to put a gun into the hands of an unobservant, illiterate, and often bloodthirsty gamekeeper, and leaves him to do exactly what he likes with it. A great landowner does, as a rule, take some pride in "showing" a fox whenever it is wanted. A heronry, if he is happy enough to possess one, he regards as the crowning glory of his park, even if the herons do make free with the inhabitants of his waters. He likes to hear that a rare bird is to be seen on his estate, and he will sometimes tolerate, perhaps even rejoice at, the presence of an otter in his osier-beds, or of a badger in his sandy hills. It is the non-resident "shooting tenant," or worse still, "the syndicate of shooting tenants," who are the arch-enemies of all wild life. A shooting tenant has, with few marked exceptions, hardly any bowels of compassion for anything but his game. A "syndicate" has none at all. A shooting tenant, of course with the same exceptions, values his land only for the head of game that he can get out of it, and visits it, chiefly or only, when the time for the battue has come. He pays his gamekeeper so much

per head of game, and the gamekeeper makes it his business to destroy everything that is not game.

By the easy-going process which once divided the world into Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, he divides the larger animals of his shoot into game and vermin. The one instruction he gives to his gamekeeper may be best summed up in the impassioned utterance of the poor old brain-stricken, tempest-riven King Lear—

“Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill;”

and the gamekeeper, with a right good will, obeys his master and does

“Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill.”

Under these sinister influences, many of our most interesting birds and animals are ceasing to exist. The bustard and the bittern, owing to the increase of the population and the reclamation of the fens, are things of the long past. The buzzard, the harrier, and the peregrine falcon are becoming rarer and rarer. The fork-tailed kite is as dead as Queen Anne. The Cornish chough is nearly as extinct as the Cornish language. The principle of a preserve for interesting wild animals, such as would otherwise be extirpated, has been established by the Americans, on an extensive scale, in the

Yellowstone Park. It has been secured by the British Legislature, thanks chiefly to the exertions of Mr Edward N. Buxton, in a part of Somaliland and elsewhere in Africa ; and a similar preserve, on a small scale, which might well be extended to the New Forest, has been set apart by the Crown, in Wolmer Forest in Hampshire. No tribute could be more appropriate to the memory of Gilbert White, none would have given him more pleasure, than the consecration in perpetuity of a region through which he so often wandered, to the wild animals and birds which he so keenly loved.

But why should not every large estate if its owner be resident upon it, as is still happily the case in most parts of England, and if he have any love for real wild life, become, in itself, a sort of sanctuary? There is a balance in nature which man never transgresses but at his cost. Witness it, the wholesale destruction of owls and hawks, and the portentous increase of rats and mice. There is a principle of "live and let live," which enlightened self-interest no less than the public good, sentiment no less than reason, demand. There may be as much game on an estate as any true and moderate sportsman can desire ; but is there not also room in it for the wild swoop of the sparrow-hawk, for the

graceful hovering of the kestrel, for the solemn hoot of the owl, for the harsh scream of the jay, for the cheerful chatter of the magpie and the jackdaw? And among all the birds which charm the ear with their resonant cries, the eye by the beauty of their form, their colour or their flight, the historic imagination by the memories of the long past which are bound up with it, the raven, if only he can be induced to revisit and inhabit again the home of his ancestors, will always deserve the foremost place.

APPENDIX I

From *The Early South-English Legendary* (MS. Bodl. Laud, 108), ed. C. Horstmann (E. E. T. Soc., 1887), pp. 188-9.

MARTYRDOM OF ST VINCENT

“Ded we wolleth him over-come : zwane we ne mizten a-live.

Into *the* wilde felde : *that* bodi ze beren wel blive,
Wilde bestes and foules : to-drawe heo schullen in sone.”
This men brouzten *that* bodi *thare* : and duden *the*
kingus bone.

Thare cam fleo a raven : and adown *thare*-bi he a-lizte,
 Kene and suy*the* dredful : i-redi he was to fizte ;
 Zif *thare* come ani foul to : *that this* bodi i-seize,
The raven smot to grounde : ne mosten *thare* come
 non neize,
 Ake evere he drof heom a-wei *thudere* zwane heo
 come ;
 Ne mizte *thare* come none so kene : *that* a mossel *thar*-
 of nome.
 A wolf cam also *thuder*-ward : is mete for-to fette,
 And wolde of *that* bodi nime : *the* raven a-zein him
 sette,
 He flew and smot with bile and fot, *that the* wolf at*then*
 ende
 Blodi was and overcome : azen hamward he gan wende.
The rauon wuste *this* bodi longe ; Iwemmed nouzt it
 nas.
Tho the king it onder-zat ; *that the* bodi i hol was,
 Hom he lit it fette azen : and seide, 'zwat may beo
 ovre red,
That we ne mouwen him over-come no*ther* quik ne
 ded?' "

I subjoin a vigorous paraphrase of this part of the poem on St Vincent, which has been kindly made for my benefit and for that of the reader, by my friend, Canon Christopher Wordsworth.

After "King Dacian's" torturers had done their worst on St Vincent, an angel, with a taper, came and drew his

body from the sword points and laid it in a soft bed;
then the tyrant says:—

“Dead we shall overcome him; since alive he would
not yield,

‘Carry his carcase and cast it eftsoons in the open field.

‘The birds of prey shall tear it, and rend it the beasts of
prey.’

They carry St Vincent’s relics and the tyrant’s will
obey.

Then there came a raven flying; by the saint he did
alight

Savage and keen and dreadful: right ready he was to
fight.

As each fowl hoped to glut her, and on it thought to
fly,

This raven down he struck her; and none might e’er
draw nigh;

For still away he drave them: this raven was quicker
than they,

Nor was any so keen in swooping to carry a morsel
away.

Then a wolf came ambling thither, thinking to make a
feast;

But or ever he snatched at the body, the bird made up
to the beast.

With talon and bill he struck him; the wolf was
overcome;

Bleeding at last and beaten, he slunk away to his home.

Long watched the raven the body, that was neither
mangled nor scarred.

They tell the king that St Vincent is whole and in no
wise marred ;

He bids them bring him again ; 'How say ye, sirs,'
(quoth he)

'That whether alive or dead, he gets the better of me?'"

APPENDIX II

From *Aldhelmi Ænigmata*, p. 366. Appendix II. to
Satirical Poets of the Twelfth Century, vol ii., 1872.

DE CORVO

"Dum genus humanum truculenta fluenta necarent,
Et nova mortales multarent æquora cunctos,
Exceptis raris gignunt qui semina sæcli,
Primus viventum perdebam fœdera juris,
Imperio patris contemnens subdere colla ;
Unde puto dudum versu dixisse poetam
'Abluit in terris quidquid deliquit in undis'
Nam subolem dapibus nunquam saturabo ciborum,
Ni prius in pullis plumas nigrescere cernam.
Litera tollatur ; post hæc sine prole manebo."

While the whole human race were perishing in the cruel
waters, and seas, unknown before, were punishing, for their

sins, all mortal creatures, with the exception of the chosen few who were to preserve the race for future times, I was the first of the survivors to set at nought the compact with the Father and disobey his behests, for I spurned to bow my neck to his will. This is the reason why the poet, long since, said of me in verse, "he is atoning now on land for his former sins on the sea." My punishment is that I shall never satisfy my callow young with the food they want, till I see their feathers begin to grow black upon their white skin. Take away a letter from my name, and I shall be bereaved of them altogether.

The "Father," in line five of the above, is, of course, Noah; "the poet," in line six, is Coelius Sedulius, a Christian poet of the fifth century; and the letter to be taken from the name Corvus is *C*, leaving behind *orvus* or *orbus*, = "bereaved of my young."

CHAPTER V

THE OLD THATCHED RECTORY AND ITS BIRDS

THE Rectory is a picturesque, comfortable-looking building, of no special architectural pretensions, and of no very great antiquity, but with an atmosphere and a charm of its own which proclaim it, at almost the first glance, to be not so much a house as a home—a home in which it would be a happiness to live, and no bad place to die. Its walls bulge here and there; but they are thick and weather-proof, made to “stay” and of a rich brown brick, weather-tinted and lichen-clad, the product of the clay-beds of Fryer Mayne, in the adjoining parish of Knighton.

In front, the house has two wings, running up to high gables and projecting at right angles from the main building, which is also gabled, and they flank a paved open court which leads into the hall. A word, first, about the interior. Its main feature is

the hall, which is of a size and comeliness, with its quaint Jacobean wooden chimney-piece, its richly finished cornices, and its elaborate plaster panellings, such as you would hardly expect to find in a country parsonage. During the years when it was my home, it was crammed with pictures and with china, with curios of every description, with old oak chests filled with toys for children of all ages, with oak chairs and tables, and — most cherished treasure, perhaps, of all — with an old carved writing-desk of oak, with the date 1630 upon it, at which Wordsworth had written many of his poems. On one wall was an ancestral chiming clock, and near it an organ, which was also hereditary and of rich tone for its kind. There was a rocking-horse which had done good service with three generations of children, and which, prancing as it did, in front of a green iron chest with a double lock and a lid of portentous weight, which contained the baptismal and marriage and burial registers of the rude forefathers of the hamlet from the sixteenth century downwards, and bearing often the same names throughout, seemed to bring the “spacious times of great Elizabeth” into close juxtaposition with those of Queen Victoria. The whole was a medley of treasures which, in their number, their richness,

their variety, were typical of the mother's hand which had gathered so many of them together, and of the mother's heart which had given them all a welcome. The front hall door is of glass, and looks westward, across a circular drive, to a thick hedge which hides from view the little stream of the Winterbourne, and the rich meadows of the larger Frome lying immediately beyond. Opposite to this door, on the other side of the hall and looking over the lawn with its flower-beds, a gently rising field, our playground as children, a railway embankment, and behind it again to "Parsonage Plantation" and "Parsonage Field," was another glass door which offered a tempting and, sometimes, a fatal short cut to birds, which were either too lazy to fly round or over the house, or were in too great a hurry to reach the stream from the garden, or the garden from the stream. A song-thrush and a blackbird often, and once, alas! a kingfisher, managed to shoot safely through the open door on one side, only to dash themselves to death against the closed glass door on the other side.

Nearly every room in the house had a character of its own, but on these I must not dwell here. The two staircases were a marked contrast to each



Photo, W. Pouncey, Dorchester.]

STAFFORD RECTORY.



other : the front with old oak balusters, with broad and easy steps and landings bidding you "rest and be thankful" upon each, and with room for three or four people to go up abreast ; the back stairs narrow and almost pitch-dark, winding round and round from kitchen to attics like those of an ill-lighted church tower, each step different from its neighbour in depth and height, and each, therefore, a pitfall to those who were not to the manner born.

But that which, apart from its personal associations, gave its chief charm to the house as a whole, and that without which I should not be writing of it here and now, was its high-pitched thatched roof. It was this which, with its broad overhanging eaves, with its ridges and its furrows, its snug corners and its sunny basking-places, its grey chimneys and its moss-grown coping-stones, gave abundant shelter to all the birds which most attach themselves to man. "*Ubi aves, ibi angeli*," was a favourite dogma of no less an authority than St Thomas Aquinas ; and if he was right, then the Rectory must indeed have been angel-haunted. It was, of course, the home throughout the year of many, too many perhaps, pert and chirping and irrepressible house-sparrows. The starlings, most sprightly and energetic among birds, used, early in

March, to dig out, with perfect impunity, deep holes for themselves, which, later in the year, were occupied by other birds. In the chimneys, as well as in the many outbuildings, the swallows reared their twittering young. The house-martins moulded, with all a plasterer's skill, their architectural nests on the garden side of the house, where a wooden boarding beneath the thatch formed the eave; and, last and best of all, the swifts, those most summer-like of all summer birds, almost the last to arrive, and quite the first to depart of all our summer visitants, and speaking only of the longest and brightest days and the shortest and most balmy of nights, returned thither, year after year, with unvarying fidelity and in almost exactly equal numbers, from the far Soudan, or perhaps the still farther Madagascar or the Cape, and reared their young in exactly the same holes in which they and their ancestors had been reared before them. These and other birds it was mine to welcome and to watch, from very early years, in my home and their home, till they seemed to have become almost a part of the home itself. I could hardly have conceived of the Rectory without them or of them without the Rectory; and, had I heard it in those early years, could have echoed, or perhaps rather have reversed,

the saying of Aquinas and put it thus: "*Ubi angeli, ibi aves.*"

The surroundings of the Rectory are in perfect keeping with it. Little advantage would it be to have a picturesque centre, if, as is so often the case with the lovely old-world manor-houses which the lapse of centuries has turned into farmhouses, the outbuildings were of a wholly different type, and were roofed in with a mean and ugly slate, hot in summer and cold in winter, or with that still greater abomination of modern times, corrugated iron. One single outbuilding, thus roofed, jars upon the feelings and mars the effect of the whole, much as one bit of white paper, carelessly dropped, mars, for the moment, all the beauty of a neatly-shaven lawn. The Rectory outbuildings, numerous as they are, and headed by a grand old tithe-barn, of which I shall have something to say hereafter, are all of them thatched, the most beautiful, surely, and most suggestive of all coverings for man, and that which is most characteristic of English rural life and harmonises best with English scenery. It has its drawbacks, no doubt: it is perishable; it has to pay double insurance duty against fire, and, owing to the agricultural depression which has turned so much land that was arable into pasture, it is not

now to be got on many farms at all, and what is to be got on others is much bruised and broken by the threshing machines, which are in such general use. Yet, delightfully warm in winter and cool in summer—the exact opposite of a roof of slate—it gives a sense of comfort, of cosiness, of hospitality, of homeliness, of home to any building which it shelters. It is hardly too much to say that no cottage which is unthatched, whatever its other merits, can well be beautiful; no cottage which is thatched, however humble in itself, can well be altogether ugly. Happily, the thatched cottage still predominates in most of the villages of Dorset, and lingers even in the middle of some of the smaller towns, giving to each an idyllic charm. Nor is it so perishable, and therefore so expensive, as it is often thought. I was struck, last autumn, by a great range of farm buildings on the property of Lord Peel at Eyemouth, near Sandy, all of them thatched with reed pulled by the hand, which was evidently of considerable age and yet in perfect condition, and all glowing warmly, a sun almost in themselves, beneath the rays of the setting sun. I made inquiries as to their history and age, and Lord Peel tells me that, since his tenant came into the farm, some thirty years ago, nothing has been done nor has required to be done

to the thatch. It is, the tenant says, as good as it was then, and, in his opinion, reed thatch of that kind lasts from eighty to one hundred years! A striking incidental proof of the duration of even common thatch, and, if I may use the term, of its antiseptic qualities, I owe also to Lord Peel. In the spring of last year (1902), while an old cottage at Ledbury, belonging to Mr Biddulph, was being stripped of its straw thatch in order to replace it by reed, a brown-paper parcel was found deeply embedded in the roof. It contained a roll of white linen, 25 yards long, which, together with the invoice and a letter dated 1794, had been sent by a firm at Gloucester to a tradesman at Ledbury. The roll of linen was absolutely dry and unspoilt, not even spotted by damp, and the covering of brown paper likewise. How it got into such a hiding-place there is nothing to show; but for well over a hundred years the faithful thatch had preserved and concealed the secret intrusted to it.

Thatching is, in truth, a fine art, the finest, I suppose, to which an agricultural labourer can aspire. The fame of "the thatcher," generally an hereditary occupation handed down, in long and jealous succession, from father to son, spreads, if only he be an adept in his art, far beyond his own

to all the surrounding villages. A cluster of ricks, his handiwork, marvels of symmetry and neatness, and often set off with fantastically twisted ornaments of straw on the top, are the admiration of every passer-by. His personality often ranks next after that of the village clerk, the chief of the village hierarchy, and is as marked in its way as that of the gamekeeper, of the mole-catcher, of the "ruddleman," so well described by Mr Thomas Hardy in his *Return of the Native*. He is often skilled in folk-lore. He knows the inner character of each house and household better, perhaps, than any one else ; for he has advantages of his own ; he can look down upon the inhabitants, observing but often unobserved, from his lofty perch, and can hardly help catching hasty glimpses of them through the windows, as he ascends or descends his inseparable companion, the ladder.

A beauty and interest of its own attaches to every portion of his handiwork, and that, too, at each succeeding stage of its youth, its maturity, its decay. Notice, for instance, the exquisitely neat finish of the roof-ridge, the most critical point of the whole ; the geometrical patterns formed by the spars just below, which help, by their grip, to hold it in its place for years ; the faultless symmetry of the

slopes, the clean-cut edges, the gentle curves of the thatch, heaving, as it were, of its own accord, to canopy the upper windows which rise above the "plate"; and, better still, the embrace which, as with the encircling arms of a mother, it gives to the deep-planted, half-hidden, dormer window in the middle of the roof, nestling snugly within it, and, by its very look, inviting to peacefulness and repose. Note, too, the change of colouring in the whole, as time goes on; the rich golden russet tint, beautiful as the locks of Ceres, when the work is just completed; the warm brown of the succeeding years; the emerald green, the symptom of advancing age, when lichens and moss have begun to gather thick upon it; and, "last scene of all, which ends" its quiet, uneventful "history," when the winds and rain have worked their will upon it, the rounded meandering ridges and the sinuous deep-cut furrows which, like the waters of a troubled sea, ruffle its once smooth surface.

Most beautiful of all, perhaps, and not seen to perfection unless some trouble is taken about it, is a newly thatched roof, when, after a heavy April shower, the bright April sun peers down suddenly full upon it. Get a ladder and gaze upward along the slope of the thatch, keeping your eye as close

as possible to the bottom. You may get a wetting in the process; but it will not be long, I think, before you try to get a view of so much beauty, concentrated within so small a space, a second time. Each golden straw-end is glistening with a full round globule of transparent crystal, which lingers lovingly for a moment, then drops, as lovingly, on to the next below, and is instantly succeeded by another of equal size and beauty, coming with invisible trickle from you know not where. Ten thousand flashing pearls, each on its golden sceptre, "gorgeous" as those "showered" by Eastern monarch along with "barbaric gold" on the head of his chosen bride, and ten thousand miniature cascades, with rest in their very motion, motion in their very rest.

And now about the denizens of the thatch, the companions of my youth, and among the most cherished memories of my age. There is little, I suppose, that can be said, which has not been said in some shape or other before, about a class of birds which, by their familiarity with man, have managed to force themselves upon his attention, and have, many of them, received from him a large measure of protection or even affection in return. But no one observer sees quite eye to eye with

another. "*Idem non semper idem.*" And first, of the commonest of them all, the bird against which much may be said that cannot, I fear, be gainsaid, even by the most catholic of bird-lovers, and the bird which I myself am disposed to like least of all, the house-sparrow. Early prejudices are strong, and often inveterate; and I confess to never having got over the prejudice against the house-sparrow produced in me, in very early life, by a toy-book, forcibly and profusely illustrated—though hardly in the style of Caldecott—containing the old nursery ballad of "Who killed Cock Robin?" There, on one page, was the innocent little robin, the favourite of gods and men, the bird which had piously covered the bodies of the Babes in the Wood with leaves, lying dead, his limbs relaxed and stiffening, his bright eye glazed and dull, and a tiny arrow sticking in his orange breast, from which were oozing a few minute drops of crimson blood. And there, on the opposite page, was the vulgar-looking murderer, the fatal bow held aloft in one small claw, bold, brazen-faced, unrepentant, glorying in his deed of shame.

" 'I,' said the Sparrow,
 ' With my bow and arrow,
 I killed Cock Robin.' "

I wonder how many of what we consider to be our maturest convictions rest on, or are coloured by, our earliest prejudices!

But even the sparrow has his merits. His activity, his happiness, his friendship for man, and his pert and pushing confidence in him are among them. He is, in consequence, already the most cosmopolitan of all birds. Wherever civilised man goes, or cultivation spreads, the house-sparrow goes with them. Where they do not go, he does not. The cock sparrow of the country side, very different, be it remembered, from his smoke-begrimed brother of the large towns, is comely enough, and, were he not so common, would probably be admitted to be really handsome. On the other hand, he is noisy, impudent, self-asserting, quarrelsome. His incessant twittering or chirping, with no approach to a song, is wearisome to an extreme. He is destructive, to an incredible degree, of all kinds of grain, fruit, vegetable, especially peas, eating, it is said, many times his own weight in a day, and wasting much more than he eats. He is as quarrelsome as an Irishman at a fair or at a funeral-wake. See a cock sparrow, early in the year, fall suddenly and unprovoked upon another. The moment the loud and angry

chirp is raised, every sparrow in the neighbourhood rushes to join in the fray. There is no inquiry as to rights or wrongs ; no stint, no stay. Every one is against his neighbour. They go dashing in compact mass, tumbling over each other and over walls, "thorough bush, thorough briar," sometimes rolling headlong in the dust, the din of the conflict and the number of the combatants increasing every moment, for perhaps a couple of minutes, and then it all dies away. They disperse to their several occupations, no one being the better, and no one, apparently, much the worse for it.

What is more serious, the sparrow multiplies at a positively alarming rate ; he has three or four broods a year, and five or six young in each. It is not a case, note, of "live and let live." The sparrow-hawk and other of his natural enemies have been killed down, and every new house which is built gives him half a dozen new places in which he may build in safety, and from which it is very difficult to dislodge him. English settlers in America and Australia, naturally anxious, in their exile, for anything which could remind them of the "old country," even for the twitter of the irrepressible house-sparrow, imported him into their new homes. Now they would give anything to get rid of

him; but it is too late. The sparrows have multiplied, like the Israelites in Egypt, or the Negroes in the United States, till, as in the case of the rabbits in Australia, the land can hardly hold them. Worst count of all, by their greediness and their pugnacity, both there and here, they often succeed in driving away other and more interesting birds. The sweetest songsters, the birds of more retiring disposition or more delicate organisation—the nightingale, the blackcap, the garden warbler, the whitethroat, the willow wren—will not stay where sparrows are numerous. The nest is huge, ill-built, unshapely, untidy, with a rough dome made of long wisps of hay or straw, often mixed with bits of paper or tags of wool, and lined with a profusion of feathers in which the speckled eggs are almost lost. But, even here, the sparrow shows her want of taste. Unlike the long-tailed tit, which lines her exquisite nest with a perfect feather-bed of feathers of the daintiest colours, carefully selected from distant parts and of extraordinary softness, the house-sparrow pounces on those she first comes across, generally those from the poultry yard, specially such as an old hen, flying heavily upwards to her perch or roost, drops in large numbers from her unwieldy body. These the

nesting sparrow will often catch as they fall, or, taking two or three from the ground at once, will often drop one of them before reaching her nest, when another sparrow will intercept it, in her turn, in mid-air and carry it off to her own. Their untidy nests found ample room for themselves in the creepers of the Rectory, the roses, the vine, the wistaria, the ivy. Others were built in the pipes, on the slopes of the thatch, or on any irregularities in the walls. The marauders appropriated also the holes of the starlings after the latter had done with them. They even, on occasion, took possession of a carefully constructed house-martin's nest and ejected the proper owner. It is said, indeed, that sometimes the martins will avenge the injury and insult offered to the community by walling up, as a community, the intruder in the nest. I venture to doubt the story, partly, because I think, during so many years, I should have seen something of the kind, if it had been true, and partly, because I doubt the sparrow ever being so fond of her eggs and young, as to cling to them to the death and submit to be slowly immured with them. If you take a sparrow's nest, the bird shows, after the first minute or two, hardly a symptom of distress, and promptly begins to build another in the very same spot. The sparrow has

a "knowledge of the world," and "out of sight," with her, is often "out of mind." I should be sorry indeed if it were to be exterminated, but in the interests of other and more attractive birds, as well as of the gardener and of the farmer, I should like to see one pair where there are now ten, and ten where there are now a hundred. The difficulty of the matter is that, if you leave one pair unmolested for a single year, it will, with its three broods of six each time, have become ten pairs, and the ten pairs will have become a hundred.

About eight or ten couples of starlings frequented the Rectory and its outbuildings during the early spring months; and good tenants they were, for though the dilapidations which they left behind were considerable, I think that they paid well for their lodging by their liveliness, by their cheerful song, and by their many fascinating ways. Except for an hour or two in the early morning, and those chiefly when the breeding season is approaching, the starling is the most alert and energetic of birds, scurrying about in every direction in search of food, always in company with his fellows, and always in a hurry, as though in a race for dear life. Watch a flock of them when they have just alighted in a field of pasture, or, better still, on a newly mown lawn, in

which their minute insect prey then most swarms, or where it is most visible. They scamper over it, half running, but using their wings also to help them, and swaying their bodies, from side to side, in eager rivalry, leaving much of the ground over which they pass quite unexamined, the hinder portion of the flock often skimming over the heads of those in front, anxious lest they should lose all the tit-bits. Then a sudden whim seizes them, and they are off to the next field, before half the enclosure has been, even in appearance, traversed, to scamp their work there, in the same headlong fashion.

Now watch a pair of these very same birds on the very same lawn in March, or early in April. They have become sedate, serious, thoughtful, thorough; they no longer hurry-scurry over the surface; they take up a position on it, a yard or two apart, and appear to search every inch of ground and every blade of grass, darting their lissom heads and necks to the ground once in every two seconds, and at each movement, presumably, capturing something, till they have made a clean sweep of the insect inhabitants; and then, and not till then, do they move forward for a step or two, and repeat the same careful process. More than this, for an hour or so

every day, the male bird, at this season, seems to give himself up to contemplation—to contemplation of the world below him, of the birds flying above or around him, and, most perhaps of all, of his own perfections and those of his mate. Perched upon the highest gable or tallest chimney of the Rectory, or on the bare bough of a tree, but always in the full sight or the immediate neighbourhood of the hole he has selected for his future family, he gives himself up to pure enjoyment. There pluming himself, lowering and clapping his wings in a way not quite like any other bird, and basking in the morning sun, which positively glitters on his richly burnished feathers, he serenades his mate, or soliloquises, it may be, about what he did yesterday or is going to do to-day, sometimes in low whistle, sometimes in voluble chatter, dashed forth in a series of jerks or catches. Not without reason has he been called by Mr Cornish, in his delightful essay, “the English mocking-bird.” Other birds, especially some of the finch or crow tribe, when brought under the influence of man, may be trained to pipe tunes or to imitate various sounds made by men or animals ; but the starling is the only bird, I believe, which, in his wild state, systematically sets to work to train himself. He has the true instinct

of imitation, and he "practises" singing as assiduously as a girl at school practises on the piano ; and practice makes him so far perfect as to enable him to deceive even a well-trained ear. Does a woodpecker, a rather solitary bird, pour forth his joyous laugh from the old group of sycamores at the top of the field ? the starling on the Rectory housetop will sometimes reproduce his laugh so exactly that you will believe, for the moment, that the woodpecker's mate has taken to the thatch and is answering him from there ; and it is the same with the notes of the guinea-fowl, the peewit, the goldfinch, the song-thrush, and even some of the mellowest tones of the blackbird. He is quite a little aviary in himself, and is, moreover, no mean ventriloquist. Very beautiful are the light blue eggs, five in number, which the female bird lays in her scanty nest of straw, and most unmelodious are the loud cries which come from the five throats of the rapidly growing brood, when she visits them, as she does, once in every two or three minutes, with her mouth crammed with insects, but never sufficiently so as to still their cravings, even for a moment. Happily for the sake of peace and quietness, they soon find their wings, and take themselves off to join the noisy flocks of the other young starlings of the year, in the woods.

The starling is one of the most sociable and gregarious of all birds; not content with his own flock of from one to five hundred in number, with which he consorts for five out of the twelve months in the year, he will often join the flocks of other gregarious birds, such as rooks, jackdaws, or even wood-pigeons. He is on the best of terms, too, with four-footed animals, a flock of sheep or a herd of cows, often pitching on their backs and indefatigably ridding them of the vermin which infest them, an equal service to the rider and the ridden. He cannot even roost alone, but is not content in the late autumn or winter months without thousands or tens of thousands of companions.

Scattered all over the country, but at considerable distances from each other, are the habitual or hereditary roosting-places of the starling. Such spots attracted the notice of Pliny, and they have furnished a striking simile to the *Inferno* of Dante. Sometimes, the spot chosen is a bed of reeds, which often break, or a bed of withies, which often bend to the ground, beneath their weight. More often, as is the case with Bagber Copse, three miles from Bingham's Melcombe, it is a hazel plantation in the middle of open upland fields. Go there an hour before sunset, and the place is as sombre and

silent as the grave ; but first one and then another company come dropping in from all points of the compass, increasing in size and frequency as the minutes pass on, some of them of "numbers numberless" and very high in air, as though coming from a great distance, and gathering others to them, like a rolling snowball, as they make their way onward. They first pitch in the grass-fields around, "making the green one" black. When they rise in a body, it is "as with the sound of thunder heard remote." As they pass over your head, they literally darken the air ; and they go through a series of the most intricate evolutions, now in extended line, now in close phalanx, now wheeling round in vast circles, and without so much as one sound from their throats. But, at a signal, given we know not how, they swoop down, in a moment, into their roosting-bushes ; and then, for a quarter of an hour or more, each of the myriad throats exerts itself to its utmost in one continuous "charm" or twitter, their vesper hymn, which can be heard at the distance of half a mile, and which I can only compare to the sound of multitudinous waterfalls. At another signal, there is a sudden and absolute hush ; and then perfect silence ensues till an hour before sunrise next morning, when matins are sung,

with the same overpowering force and for the same duration. Then they rise in one vast body, circle round a little, and finally move off, each in his proper flock, to their happy and widely scattered hunting-grounds. The whole is, perhaps, one of the most interesting sights that birds can give us, within the limits of the British Islands.

The swallow is, with the one exception of the cuckoo, the most eagerly awaited and the most warmly welcomed of all the harbingers of spring. "Have you seen the swallow?" and "Have you heard the cuckoo?" are the two questions which, perhaps, pass the lips of the labourer, nay, even of the stay-at-home and often unobservant labourer's wife, more frequently than any other, in the interval between the 7th and the 17th of April. "Well, John," said the clergyman of Bingham's Melcombe, Charles Bingham, many years ago, to his old gardener and groom combined, a man who had never lived away from his native village, eleven miles from any town, and, for that reason, knew all the better the thoughts and ways of the villagers, and whose dialect was "a well of Dorset undefiled"—"Well, John, have you heard the cuckoo yet?" "Guckoo?" replied John. "We do never know now when we shall hear hun." "How's that?" said his master.

"Why," was the reply, "they did used to come on Wareham fair day, but now they do come when they be minded." It should be remarked that, since that time the bird seems to have recovered his character for conservatism and respect for local institutions, in the mind of the inhabitants; for though Wareham fair, like other country fairs, notably the much more famous Woodbury Hill fair, has been shorn of much of its importance, if you ask any one of them whether and when they have heard the cuckoo, you are pretty sure to receive the stereotyped answer, "Yes, I heerd hun," or "No, I do 'low we shall heer hun—on Wareham fair day." The same clergyman was, one day, inquiring after the health of a parishioner who had been ill. The answer was that she was much better, but "did still feel all of a nunnywutch." Concerned and perplexed by so mysterious a phrase and disease, the rector had recourse to his unerring authority, his walking and working dictionary, "Old John." "John," he said, "what is a nunnywutch?" "Well, zur," was the reply, "nunnywutch be one of them there words which us poor volks do use that hasn't got no meanin'. When any one do feel all of a higgledy-like, he do say he do feel all of a nunnywutch." *Obscurum per obscurius.* I recommend the word

itself and its definition to the attention of the distinguished author of the *Dictionary of English Dialects*, which is now in course of coming out. He may not have heard of the one, and he will certainly not be much the wiser for the other.

It was with a touch of local satisfaction or patriotism, not altogether dissimilar to that of "old John," that Gilbert White himself remarked that the night-jars of Selborne, though separated from Portsmouth by half the county of Hampshire, used often to strike up their evening "whirr" at the sound of the Portsmouth evening gun. Some of the inhabitants of Broadmayne, a village near Stafford—so I am informed by its rector, the Rev. G. W. Butler—go further even than those of Melcombe, and believing, to this day, in the hibernation of the cuckoo, say that it is at Wareham fair that "the cuckoo wakes up and buys his whistle." One local legend tells how, when, once upon a time, a large log of wood had been thrown upon the dogs of a yule fire, the cry of "cuckoo," as though from a martyr in the flames of Smithfield, burst from a bird who was sleeping away the chill hours of winter within it, and suddenly found himself too warm; while another tells of an encaged cuckoo which fell asleep, at the time of migration, in a corner of his

cage, and being aroused by his owner too early in the spring, in the hope that he might herald the summer, fell a victim to this unnecessary interference with his habits. He uttered a plaintive double "cuckoo" and then died, like the wild swan, fluting his own death carol. It may be remembered that Gilbert White half believed, to the end of his life, in the hibernation of the swallow, and that Thomas Carew, in a graceful poem of two centuries earlier on "*May-day*," coupled the cuckoo with the swallow in its long winter sleep :—

"But the warm sun thaws the benumbed earth
And makes it tender, gives a second birth
To the dead swallow, wakes in hollow tree
The drowsy cuckoo and the humble bee."

Both birds, the swallow and the cuckoo, are suggestive of everything that is joyous, and of nothing that is not joyous in Nature, and Stafford Rectory was well off for both. A few words, first, about the cuckoo. You could not come out from either door of the hall, in spring, without hearing him all round you. Long before it was light, he would often begin to "tell his name to all the hills." He often continued to do so, till long after it was dark. He was, in the truest sense of the word, "a wandering voice," in the alders by the

Winterbourne, in the lime-tree or the group of sycamores in the field in "Parsonage Plantation" beyond. I recollect finding, in quite early life—always an event and a surprise, even in the annals of an old lover of birds, and this was the first of the kind that I had met with—the egg of a cuckoo in a water-wagtail's nest, built in a large heap of faggots which were stacked in the "barton," at the back of the old tithe-barn.

The questions raised by such a find, and the abnormal, nay, unique instincts of the cuckoo with regard to its eggs and young, are many, and appeal almost as much to the child as to the scientific observer. How comes the cuckoo, a bird of the size of a kestrel hawk, to lay an egg about a fifth of the size of a kestrel's and half the size of a thrush's? Does she feel any pang of motherly anxiety, any twinge of conscience, when she transfers all her responsibilities, as mother and nurse, to a bird of quite a different kind, one with whom she has had no sort of communication—a bird, too, a quarter of her own size: a hedge-sparrow, a robin, a titlark, a reed-warbler, a white-throat? How does she get her egg into the nest, which is often, as in the case of this particular wagtail squeezed into a narrow recess, into which

it was barely possible that she could make her way, or, again, into a nest which, as in the case of the garden-warbler or the blackcap, is so slender and so slenderly supported, that it could not bear her weight even for a moment? Does she, when there is room for such a feat of aërial skill, hover, for a brief space, over the nest, as the swallow will sometimes hover, for a moment, over your head, when you are near its nest, or as a kingfisher will sometimes hover over the stream, before he dives for the minnow, and deftly drop her egg into it, or does she lay it elsewhere, and carry it delicately to its destined home in her bill or claw? Does the unfortunate foster-mother notice the unauthorised introduction of an egg into her nest, often so unlike in colour to her own? Does she realise, when at last she hatches her eggs, that all her own offspring must needs perish, in order that the young intruder may survive? Why does she show no pity for her own callow young, so ruthlessly thrown out, one after the other, from their proper home and left to perish below? Whence comes the self-forgetting devotion that leads the foster-parents to spend and to exhaust all their energies in feeding their overgrown foster-child, which soon becomes twice as big as themselves; and whence comes to

the young interloper that strange instinct which compels it, only a few days after it has been hatched, when it is still sightless and unable to raise its body, to insert itself with enormous labour under the bodies of its foster-brothers or sisters and eject them, one after the other, from the nest, in order to make room for itself? There are few more grotesquely interesting sights in Nature than that of the young monster, when it has outgrown the nest, and is already bigger than its foster-parents, squatting, as my young cuckoo did, in the middle of the barton, opening its mouth wide enough almost to swallow the Lilliputian parents themselves, as they ply it with minute insect food, or a little later on, when it has learned to perch, sitting on the iron railings of the garden, and receiving the same assiduous attentions. That the cuckoo has some local attachments and is not a mere "wandering voice," and that the wagtail does not learn, by bitter experience, to shirk the duties imposed upon it, is proved, I think, by what happened at Stock House, a few miles from Bingham's Melcombe. Three years running, a pair of wagtails, who haunted the lawn there throughout the year, built their nest in exactly the same spot, hidden by a creeper, on a ledge above the front door of the house; and three

years running, a cuckoo, presumably the same bird, laid its egg in the nest, which, in due time, became a young cuckoo, ejected its brethren, and was reared, with equal prodigality of care, by the foster-parents, in full sight of the windows.

As for the swallows which delight the eye, as much as the cuckoo delights the ear—if we except the proverbial “one swallow that does not make a summer,” but appears on or about the first of April, only to make an April fool of you, and promptly disappears again to wait for more genial weather—they used to arrive, through a long series of years, about the 11th of April. For a fortnight or so, they would disport themselves, preparing for the more serious business of life, or waiting till food should be more abundant; then, true to their name, two pairs of “chimney” swallows regularly built their nests in a particular flue of each of the two biggest chimney-stacks which, owing to the proximity of the thatch, was never allowed to be profaned by fire or smoke. Often, when sleeping in one of the attics, you would be roused, in early morning, by the twittering of the young brood a few feet above your head, or by one of the parent birds which came tumbling down the chimney into the room, and would either promptly escape through the open

window, or, allowing itself to be caught, would give you an opportunity of observing at close quarters, before you let it go, the beautiful steel blue of its upper parts, its rich chestnut forehead and gorget, and its little feet and legs, so ill adapted for walking—the one disability which Nature seems to have imposed upon it and its relations—the great length of its wings, and its strongly forked tail.

The nest was always placed a few feet down the chimney, supported by a loose brick or an angle in the brickwork ; for the swallow is by no means so skilled an architect as its nearest relative the house-martin. It is a rough structure, formed of minute bits of clay, cemented together, partly, by Nature herself, at the puddles by the roadside from which the bird may be seen procuring it, partly, by the sticky saliva of the bird's own mouth, and strengthened by long untidy straws or bents, which are often left sticking out many inches from the nest. It is a genuine bit of "rough-cast," scantily lined with feathers, and, unlike the martin's nest, open all round. Every outhouse about the place had its pair of swallows ; in particular, the coal-hole, a grimy place enough, but selected, for some inscrutable reason, year after year, from all the spots accessible to these "birds of the sun" between

England and sun-scorched Africa, and from which they always managed to emerge without one apparent speck on their glossy plumage. There were two nests in the tithe-barn, one in the garden-house, and one always in the wood-house, in which I used to keep my tame white and barn owls, though the only access to it, except in broad daylight when the door was open, was by a little round hole in the door, too narrow to allow of the birds entering it, except by deftly drooping and half closing their wings.

No wonder that the swallow has been considered sacred by most, and is the darling of all, the countries which he visits. There is no need to plead for his protection; his own charms are his all-sufficient defence and passport. What a delight to watch the unwearied and ever-varying evolutions of his flight throughout the live-long summer day, now as he skims along the smoothly shaven lawn, with open mouth and rapid zigzags to left or right, when some microscopic insect catches his eye, now as he hovers for a moment over your head, now as he essays a longer flight over the fields, darting in and out under the chestnuts or elms or limes, cruising round the grazing or ruminating cattle and luxuriating in the insect life which they

attract to themselves, or, again, accompanying, for some half a mile together, a horse as it canters along, now well behind and now well in front of him, feeding, without any apparent effort, on the insect prey which its flying hoof disturbs and spurns. Watch him again, where his food most of all abounds, in the water-meadows, threading, on a spring morning, the sinuous course of a stream or shaving its smooth surface, where it broadens out into a limpid pool or lakelet. See how he sips the nectar as he flies, and, taking his morning bath, will all but dip himself beneath it, ruffling its surface into little ever-expanding circles, till at last, not, I think, because he is tired—he does not seem to know what fatigue is—he will perch on the dead branch of some overhanging tree, between wind and water, and there, for the space of several minutes together, he will first shake off the dewdrops, and then, puffing out his little frame, will delicately preen his bright plumage, lifting first one wing and then another high above his body, and burying, for a moment or two, his chestnut head in the cosiest corner beneath it; and then, after pouring forth the ecstasy of his heart in twittering song—one of the most jubilant sounds in Nature—will launch off again into his native air.



Photo, W. Pouncey, Dorchester.]

STAFFORD RECTORY.



There is not a stage in his six months' residence with us, or in the growth of the two young families, which he rears to maturity during them, that has not some special interest of its own. Notice, as he pitches by a puddle on the roadside, along with his fellows, the martins, "puddling" the clay for his straw-built nest that is to be, how daintily he holds up his long wings and tail, lest they too may be "puddled" in the process. Notice, again, how when the mother swallow has tempted her brood to take their first adventurous plunge from the chimney-top on to the ridge of the thatch below, how she returns, every minute or two, to the little row of open mouths and, hovering over them, fills each in turn with food, accompanied by a fond twitter of unselfish maternal love, which is returned with interest, by the half-cupboard love of the five little eager throats below. This process it used to be mine to watch through the dormer window of the attic in which I slept, as they were perched on the leads just outside of it, from the distance of a few feet only. The young birds of the year soon gather into little flocks, and these again into larger ones, lining, in common with the martins, now the whole ridge of the thatch, and, now again, the telegraph wires, which I well remember they seemed

to claim as their own, as soon as ever they were first erected, some fifty years ago. The size of the wires exactly suits their little feet, and enables them to dart on or off without impediment, exactly as the spirit moves them. As autumn advances, the flocks grow in size, covering the wires for many hundred feet together, as if to discuss in concert measures for their approaching departure. Again and again you may see them launch forth from their post of vantage in a vast body, and go straight away, till they are out of sight, as though they are "off at last." But they will reappear again and again, or perhaps they may be succeeded by other flights coming southward, and resting themselves on the same wires for a time, till, one damp October morning, you wake up and find that they are all really gone, in their life-long pursuit of the summer sun, and you realise what, for six months to come, you will have lost in losing them.

The habits of the house-martin so much resemble, and are so much more easily observed than those of the swallow, that I will say nothing of them here, except to point out that they are more fond of man and of his dwellings even than the swallow, following him into the most grimy and thickly populated of towns; that the nests of the

small communities in which they live are much more closely packed together than those of other birds which live in large communities, the rooks, the black-headed gulls, the gannets, the terns, and the sand-martins; that their nests are miracles of architectural and plastering skill, closely adhering to each other as well as to the overhanging eave which forms their common roof; that a second or even a third row of nests is sometimes found attached to those above, and that there are few prettier sights than to observe the parent bird, steel-blue and brown on its upper parts, pure white beneath, and with its patch of conspicuous white feathers at the base of the tail, clinging on to the outside of its nest, in full view of, perhaps, a crowded street below, and feeding the little white throats, which, crowded together, protrude through the narrow opening, eager, one would think, as much for a breath of air as for a particle of food.

But the greatest glory of the thatched Rectory-roof was the number of the swifts, the largest, the least common, and, owing to their amazing powers of flight—unequalled by any other bird, except the frigate—far the most interesting of the swallow tribe. I would explain that I class them here with the swallows, only on the ground of their general habits

and appearance. Scientific ornithologists now place them, for anatomical reasons, in a separate class next to the goatsuckers or woodpeckers. Not less than twelve pairs used to build in the roof, and always in the same holes, doubtless, identically the same birds in each, though I never proved it to demonstration, as I might have done, by tying small pieces of differently-coloured silk to the claws of the old birds which I held, year after year, in my hand, and which I seemed to know, and which seemed to know me so well. Few birds attracted the attention of old Gilbert White more than the swift. He chronicled the dates of their arrival and departure; he described the peculiarities of their structure and of the vermin which invest them; he speculated on their love-making and their hibernating. The *Natural History of Selborne* I knew almost by heart when I was a boy of twelve; and I well remember the zest with which I handled the first swift I had ever found in its nest, when it occurred to me that I was treading, *longo intervallo* certainly, but still treading in the great naturalist's footsteps. But now, when I come to think of it, it was not exactly treading in his footsteps; for I have grave doubts whether the all-observant Fellow of Oriel ever climbed a tree,

or even mounted a ladder, in his life. It was a "bold boy"—a "bold bad boy," he probably thought him—and not the old naturalist himself, who climbed the "beech in Selborne Hanger, though standing on so steep and dizzy a situation," on which a pair of honey-buzzards had built their nest, and who brought down the one egg that was in it. He never dilates upon the beauty or the charm of the eggs of a bird of prey as you see them lying in the nest, when, after a weary struggle upwards, you are at length able to look *down* at them from above; and that I feel sure he must have done, had he ever seen them therein, for it is one of the crowning joys of the lover of birds. But all that he could do on *terra firma*, and infinitely more than any one else had ever done before, or has done since, he did. In his eyes—and well indeed is it for our own over-self-appreciation that there are some people who take that view—man was one of the least important and least interesting of animals. The biography of his old tortoise, "Timothy," interested him far more than the biography of "Timothy's" equally noteworthy contemporaries, General Clive and General Wolfe, George Washington and the Earl of Chatham. The fall of Quebec was a matter of less moment in his eyes

than the fall of that immemorial "raven-tree," to which the mother bird clung faithfully, till she was "whipped down by the twigs and brought dead to the ground."

The swift arrives so late, about the 10th of May, and departs so early, about the 10th of August, that, once landed here, he has no time to waste, like the swallow or the martin, in looking about him. But how does he get the materials for his nest? He is under strange disabilities in this respect; he can neither perch upon a tree, nor stand upon the ground, nor walk a yard. He can hardly even crawl, and if he once touches the ground by accident, it is a question whether he ever will be able to rise again. The Alpine swift, which builds, it is said, to the number of two hundred in Berne Cathedral, has the difficulty solved for him by the kindly keeper of the tower, who makes it his business to scatter broadcast into the air, during the building season, feathers, and horsehair, and bits of paper, which are caught up in mid-air, in eager rivalry, by the swifts careering round, and are promptly carried to their holes. I have watched our native swifts for hours, and have never seen them catch a feather in the air, or carry it or any other building material into

their homes. The nest consists exclusively, I believe, of the *débris* of the thatch in which it is built, or of feathers and other material carried in by other birds who have used the hole before, cemented together into a very rough saucer, by the viscous saliva of the bird's own mouth. It contains two long white eggs, never more ; and is always built close to the point of entry, so that there is no laborious crawl, either from it or to it, and the bird can drop down at once from it into mid-air, often all but reaching the ground, and sometimes, I fear, quite reaching it, before she can find her wings. What is still more remarkable—and I have never seen the peculiarity noticed by any one—the old bird never, under any circumstances, cared to leave her nest, while I was climbing the ladder, to see how it was getting on, but calmly or even callously sat on, allowing herself to be removed, without so much as a flutter of the wings or the faintest effort to escape, and to be held in my hand while I examined, at my leisure, her big round eye, able in the middle of her flight, at the rate of a hundred miles an hour, to detect and intercept an insect which you could only just see with the naked eye, as it came crawling out, still alive, from her huge gaping mouth, crammed with scores of them ; the one

little white patch on her chin in the middle of her otherwise black-brown plumage; the enormous expanse of wings, looking, when they are spread in flight, like the flukes of an anchor; and the tiny legs unable to support the weight of the bird for a moment on a horizontal surface, but armed with claws sharp enough to enable it to cling to the smoothest brick or stone wall, while it is feeding its mate, or its young in the nest close above.

It is a question still much disputed whether a swift can ever rise from the ground. My own experience in the matter—and I have tried the experiment, not once, but a score of times—is as follows. Drop him from a little height on to the ground, and he will often manage, with a sort of rebound, to flutter up at once; or place him, when you happen to have found him on the ground, on a rather steep bank where the grass is short, and he will succeed in rising from it; but lay him gently on rough ground or grass, and hold your hand over him for a minute, his muscles will become cramped and he will be quite unable to rise, and, if you do not assist him, will crawl along on his belly, till he dies, or becomes a victim of the cat. If, on the other hand, when you have examined him at your leisure, you toss him into the air, he will circle

round two or three times at his leisure, and then go back, as if nothing had happened, to the nest from which you have taken him.

What marvellous powers of flight he has! From three o'clock in the morning of a long summer's day till eight or nine at night, the male bird will be on the wing; and in that time, making all due allowance for the brief repose he may, perhaps, snatch while he returns at rare intervals, his mouth filled with tiny insects, to feed his mate and the young, he will have covered at least a thousand miles. Sometimes, he will sweep along the surface of the grass or of a river, like the swallow, but never, I think, dipping as he goes, and then, after a few rapid beats of his wings, will sail forwards for a hundred yards or so, by his mere *momentum*, without any apparent movement of his pinions. Sometimes, he will twist and turn from side to side more like a bat than a bird; and then again, by a few powerful downward strokes, he will mount aloft with his fellows, and circle round with them at a height in air, at which his body, with its long sweep of wings, will be hardly visible to the eye, his piercing scream hardly audible to the ear.

But the most joyous and striking scene of all, and that which is associated in my mind most

indissolubly, with Stafford Rectory, is about half an hour before and after sunset, on a bright summer's evening, when the clouds are radiant, as with a glory not of earth. Then, chasing or chased by each other, all the male birds in the little colony sweep round, at what seems to be double their usual speed and with double their usual screams, in circles now much narrower, now much wider, but always having as their centre—for the centre, indeed, it is to them of all their anxieties, their affections, and their hopes—the thatched roof in which they themselves and their mates, their ancestors and their still unfledged young ones, have been born and bred. Their speed is at the very fastest, and their scream at the very loudest, as they skim along the eaves, and dash perilously near to the angles of the house in which their mates are sitting, as though to inquire how they are getting on, and to assure them that out of sight is not out of mind. Sometimes, the wife will answer by a reassuring muffled scream from within; and sometimes “nature will out,” and she too will dash forth after her husband, and easing her wings and legs, cramped, as they must be, by her long confinement, join, for a few minutes, the headlong and jubilant rout. Then, as darkness comes on, each bird will sweep with a sudden and sullen thud

heard rather than seen, into its hole, and all is silent and still, for the all too brief summer night.

One sad and strange characteristic of the swallow tribe I must not altogether pass over. The affection of a mother for her young, which is found in all the higher portions of Creation, is the most powerful, the most beautiful—may we not say the most divine?—of all impulses whatsoever. It has less of earth in it than heaven. Under its influence, the mother who is naturally timid becomes reckless in her courage; she who is naturally pleasure-loving is absorbed in her maternal anxieties; she who was most selfish becomes self-forgetting or even self-annihilating; yet, in the swallow tribe, there is an impulse which is, on occasion, more imperious even than the parental—the impulse of migration. A bird of passage, confined in a cage, will often dash itself to death against the bars when autumn comes; and a pair of swifts, a pair of swallows, a pair of martins, have, once and again, been known, when the hour strikes for their departure, to leave a late brood of callow young to perish in their nest, rather than disobey its mysterious, its inexorable demands.

A few words, in conclusion, about the old tithe-barn. It forms one side of the big stable-yard,

where my tame raven "Jacob" used to play his pranks, and store up his stolen treasures for his successor. A stable and coach-house have been cut out of it, but it is still one of the biggest buildings in the parish, and looks as though it could still hold a tithe of all the parish produce. The picturesque projection in the middle, under the shelter of which a loaded waggon can take its stand, extended its hospitality to all the birds I have described as haunting the Rectory thatch, except the swift. In these modern days, a barn gives shelter, only or chiefly, to the uncomfortable-looking machinery, steam ploughs and reaping machines, which form the necessary stock-in-trade of the modern farmer ; but, in my day, the barn was filled to the very rafters with wheat, or straw, or hay ; and the dark recess in the topmost corner was the sanctuary of the white owl, which I could watch, while it was watching for its prey, as I have described in detail in the earliest chapter of this book.

But the old barn had other uses than the agricultural. Parish memories clustered thick around it. It had celebrated, so I used to hear, the "accession of King George," probably of all the sorry lot of Georges, with equal and unquestioning loyalty ; with better reason, the whole parish

held high festival in it, "the young still dancing, while the old surveyed," at the accession of Queen Victoria, as it has, in later times, at her successive jubilees, and at the accession of her son. The first missionary meeting, which was ever held in the parish, was held beneath its rafters. One use to which it was put during the earlier part of the last century was highly illustrative both of the place and time. The bishops, the archdeacons, the clergy of those days were not quite what they are now. A bishop, could then, without offence, advise his candidates for ordination to "stick to their studies, and not waste their time in visiting their parishioners; so would they be more likely to obtain preferment here, and heaven hereafter." The leading object of the archdeacon's triennial visitation in the county of Dorset was supposed to be the friendly interchange, among the clergy, of their manuscript sermons, each clergyman bringing back with him a stock calculated to last for the next three years, the work—if, indeed, it was the original work—of a neighbour, while he, in his turn, conferred a like benefit on some one else. "I'm sure I don't know how it be," said the gardener-and-groom-in-one of one of these clergymen—the counterpart, I suppose, of old John of Bingham's Melcombe—"but our maister do always

seem to get hold of a stock of uncommon dull ones." The parson was, not uncommonly, a sportsman first and a parson afterwards ; one who rode well to hounds, and of the type of the famous " Billy Butler " of Frampton, who, on hunting days, used, so it is said, to go to daily service with his surplice over his hunting dress, and who, when another young clergyman just ordained, and, as I have the best reason to know, of a very different type, was introduced to him, said, " Pleased to know you, sir ; your father and I have been in, together, at the death of over a thousand foxes." When he died, he gave directions that his body should be laid to rest in the churchyard, in the little space which had been left between those of " the greatest saint and the greatest sinner he had ever known." Perhaps he was half conscious to himself that he was half way between the two, like that famous hero of Sir Walter Scott, of whom it was remarked that he was " o'er bad for blessing, and o'er good for banning." But, for all that, the parsons of that day were not a bad sort. " Other times, other manners ;" and they had a knowledge of men and manners and times too, which has not always been equalled by their much more spiritually-minded successors. They looked well after the temporal interests of their flock, if they sometimes neglected their eternal.

They doctored them, made their wills for them, hid their goods for them, when they were likely to be seized by the sheriff's officer; and Archdeacon England, the rector of West Stafford, was no exception to the rule. He was a great breeder of horses. What is now the outer kitchen-garden, was then covered by a long row of tumbledown stables or sheds, in which the main business of his life was carried on. How he discharged his archidiaconal functions I do not know; but, anyhow, he was very fond of asking his neighbours to take his Sunday duty for him. "England expects every man to do his duty," was an echo from Trafalgar which reached his little village, and acquired new significance, and a double meaning, in the minds of his parishioners and of the neighbouring clergy. When some one taxed him with the obvious inconsistency between a sermon which he had just heard him preach and his daily practice, he promptly answered, with shrewd sense, "Don't you do as I do, but do as I tell you." The most sturdy, and not the least respectable of the inhabitants of his parish, like those of the surrounding villages, Knighton, Warmwell, Woodsford, Tincleton, were all, on occasion, smugglers. They would work in the fields through a long summer's day; start, at dusk, for the cliffs of Ringsted or

Whitenose, eight or nine miles off; meet, as arranged, the little craft which ran into a creek laden with illicit spirits, and, sometimes, after a smart brush with the "Government folk," more often, quite unmolested, would return by dawn of day, carrying each of them a keg or two of brandy on his back, and then go to work as if nothing had happened, and as if they had been sleeping peacefully in their beds all night. Many a story of such brushes or of hair-breadth escapes have I heard, when a boy, from one of these smugglers, George Treviss, who had long been transformed into an underkeeper. "Did you ever," I asked him one day, in strict confidence, "cut about or kill any of the Government folk?" "No," was the reply, "but I have helped tie 'em to a post often." It was the romance of their lives. They were not too well off in point of wages; and the archdeacon and parson in one would have had much less perfect sympathy with his archdeaconry and his parishioners than he had, if he had not turned a blind eye to this source of increased income for them. He placed the tithe-barn at their disposal—a queer "benefit of clergy"—and I have been told that scores of kegs of illicit brandy often lay, in perfect security, beneath innocent-looking heaps of hay or straw, till there

was a convenient opportunity for disposing of them otherwise. Sometimes, they overflowed even the sanctuary of the tithe-barn, and were stowed in the *sanctum sanctorum* of the church belfry.

Kingsley used to remark that a good game-keeper was often a poacher turned outside in, just as a successful poacher was often a gamekeeper turned inside out. Old George Treviss had been a keen smuggler, and, I do not doubt, a keen poacher also in his day, but he was certainly not, in his advanced life, a keen gamekeeper. "Look at old George," said the hardly less aged head game-keeper, George Gill, to me one day—a man who had all the shrewd native wit and humour, in real life, of one of Mr Thomas Hardy's best characters in fiction—when, as we were beating Knighton Heath Wood for game, he turned round and saw, not for the first time, his next in command, lagging well behind the line of beaters, and leaning heavily against a tree, "look at George a-*straightening* the trees, as he has a-been all day." George Gill was himself a remarkable man, in every sense of the word. He was bailiff, head keeper, and head labourer all in one, to the squire of the village, Mr John Floyer, who was, for many years, Member of Parliament for the County of Dorset, and a man

held in high honour by all who knew him. Gill was like one of the ancient Huns in appearance, a man of immense strength and stature, bolt upright even to an advanced old age, with scanty hair, and with small deep-set eyes which looked at you, with a strange twinkle, from behind his prominent cheek bones. He was excellent at repartee. When in conversation with you, he would often walk four or five steps away, as if he were off, and would then return to the charge. He always spoke out exactly what he thought ; and home truths came fast and thick from him. There might not be much game as the result of a day's shooting with him ; but he himself was always game, always gave the best of sport. His tart sayings kept every one in good humour and on the *qui vive*. He could neither read nor write ; but he could carry the most elaborate accounts in his head, and would dictate them, with scrupulous honesty and accuracy, at the end of each week, to his daughter, who wrote them down for him. He could manage land admirably, and could lay out a water-meadow—a work of considerable art—with a skill which made his services to be greatly in request among the neighbouring gentry. He was quite alive to his own merits, and placed himself on full equality, if indeed in not something more than equality, with

the squire and the clergyman. "A little while," he said to me, one day, ruefully, "and your father will be gone (Canon Reginald Smith, the Rector of the parish), and John will be gone (his master the squire), and George will be gone (himself)—poor Stafford!" The potentates of the village were, clearly enough, in this instance at all events, named in the ascending scale.

What joy it was, when we were children and the day was hopelessly wet, to be allowed to put behind us, for the time, the humdrum of everyday life, and transfer ourselves to the mysterious and awe-inspiring precincts of the barn! No other spot, not even the hay-loft, seemed so to fill our childish imaginations. When once the big folding doors had been shut behind us, we said good-bye to the outer world; we seemed to be in another world, a world of shadows. Such muffled sounds as managed to reach us from the outside seemed to come as from very far away. Throw yourself down upon your back, you that are "a child of larger growth," on a bright summer afternoon, beneath the tall bracken, and, looking up to the blue sky through its greenery, allow yourself to fall into a day-dream. The stems of the bracken will soon and easily transform themselves into a primeval forest of gigantic stature with

interlacing branches ; and the insect life which swarms among them will fill the place of the birds and climbing animals of the tropics. So was it with us children and the barn. As you lay silent in the soft, sweet-smelling hay, and gave yourself up, as children best will and can, to the influence, the genius, the *religio* of the spot, the limitations of time, and space, and probability seemed to vanish into air. The rustle of the mouse or rat, coming nearer and nearer, filled you with a half-fascinating awe, as though it were the footfall of some beast of prey in an Indian jungle. The venerable rafters seemed to grow in size, in the prevailing gloom, the darkness visible ; the roof above them seemed to rise higher and higher, till it loomed on the imagination like the groined arches of some Gothic cathedral, and the yard-long cobwebs of the centuries which depended from it, seemed, like the glowing ashes in a dying fire, to take weird and ever-varying shapes ; now, as it were, of tattered banners, the relics of a hard-fought field ; and now again, as the breeze swayed them to and fro, of the nodding plumes of a stately hearse, making its way slowly and silently towards an open grave. Tempered awe is often dearer to the heart of a child than boisterous merriment, and its pleasurable pains are among the

fond regrets of a later, and a sadder, and not always a wiser age.

“Lay them where childhood’s dreams are twined
In memory’s mystic band ;
Like pilgrim’s withered wreath of flowers,
Plucked in a far-off land.”

CHAPTER VI

THE WILD DUCK

THE mallard is one of the very few birds indigenous to England, or naturalised therein, which have a bright and brilliant colouring. When you have mentioned the kingfisher, the green woodpecker, the cock pheasant, the goldfinch, and the golden oriole, which last is a rare and occasional visitant, you have named almost all the birds which challenge marked attention in this respect. Who but the blind, physically or morally, can fail to notice, and if he notice, can fail to admire, the glossy, metallic green of the mallard's neck, the collar of white that comes next below, the deep chocolate-red of his breast, the chestnut-brown of his mantle, his bright orange legs and feet, above all, the four middle feathers of his tail which curve and curl so gracefully upward, and are

as peculiar to him and his; as are the gracefully outward-curling feathers of the full-grown black-cock? It is interesting, though, perhaps, rather humiliating, to remark that these colours are substantially retained, though with far less intensity, in the heavy and unwieldy form of his domestic counterpart.

The wild duck as I have said, is indigenous to England. But, as in the case of other wading or web-footed birds, the progress of agriculture, the draining of the fen-countries, and the total disappearance of great inland lakes, like Whittlesea-Mere, have enormously reduced its numbers; and it is to the autumnal migration from the Orkneys and Shetlands, from Iceland, from Lapland, and from Scandinavia generally, that we owe some nine-tenths of the vast quantity of birds of this species which are found, in favoured parts of England, during the winter months. Is it not possible that the depression of agriculture, which is so rapidly causing land that has been reclaimed to revert to its original state, may also bring back some of its older and dispossessed inhabitants? If so, in the eyes of the naturalist at all events, though not, perhaps, of the much-suffering landlord and his tenants, the agricultural depression will not

be carried to the bitter end, without one slightly compensating advantage.

The wild duck is, like the raven, one of the most cosmopolitan of birds. He eschews, indeed, the eternal frosts of the Arctic circle, and the torrid heats of the Equatorial region; but almost everywhere else he is to be found. He is at home on the fiords of Norway, on the mud-banks of the Guadalquivir, on the lakes of Mexico, amid the cataracts and lagunes of the Nile. He abounds on Lake Tchad, the heart of the African, and on Lob Nor, the heart of the Asiatic continent. The moment that Lake Sirikol, the cradle of the Oxus, high up in the Pamir, the Roof of the World, begins to thaw beneath the summer sun, its waters are covered with fleets of the wild duck. He is to be met with throughout North and Central America, in the West Indies and the Azores, in Persia and India, in China and Japan. One fact, no doubt, which accounts for or illustrates this extraordinary dispersion is that he is almost omnivorous. The tender grass of the water-meadow, with the creeping things that abound therein, the minute shellfish, and the molluscs of the stream or mud-bank, the acorns strewn beneath the oak, the peas, or beans, or grains of barley left upon the stubble-

field—nothing seems to come amiss to him. He feeds by night as well as by day, and much more by night than by day, plunging his bill deeply into the ooze, and sifting, by fineness and delicacy of touch alone, that which is nutritious from that which is the reverse, of all that filters through the fringe of minute saw-like teeth which lines his mandibles.

The time of year at which the wild duck is most interesting, and most open to observation is, as in the case of other birds, the breeding season. The drake and duck pair very early in the spring. Their courtship is graceful enough; but it is as ceremonious, and must prove as tedious to all but those who are personally concerned, as, it must be admitted, is the love-making portion of the story, in the otherwise incomparable novels of Sir Walter Scott. Waterton, who was an intense lover of Nature, and a careful preserver of all wild birds, used to watch the punctilious etiquette of the would-be lovers, from the hollow of an old oak tree growing on a steep hill, above his sheet of water; and I have often done the same, with the help of a magnifying glass, from amidst the heather of the solitary fir plantation in Dorsetshire, to which I have so often referred in previous chapters—the plantation in which

the raven formerly reared its young, and where, to this day, the long-eared owl, the crow, the magpie, the kestrel, and the night jar, still build their nests or lay their eggs, in comparative security. Two small ponds, in my own garden at Harrow, enabled me, for many years, to observe, without disguise and with greater ease, the same process, and to listen to the same old love story, as told by the quacking or the quorking of my semi-domesticated wild ducks. The happy pair swim round each other in coy and graceful circles, now nearer and now further away; and, at given points, they stop short, and nod, and bow, and curvet, and simper, each to each, with a low crooning noise. The drake is, of course, in the full glory of his spring apparel; and I am bound to say that he seems often to be passive rather than active. He is the coquette, whose business it is to be courted rather than to court. "He would be wooed, and, not unsought, be won." The duck, on her part, tries to make herself as attractive as possible—a very difficult task with her very sober or sombre plumage—by lowering herself in the water, till only the top of her back and neck can be seen, and by quorking in as many notes as the narrow compass of her voice will allow her.

The first duty of the mated pair is to choose a place for the nest. It is situated—for, being of such scanty materials, it can hardly be said to be built—sometimes, at the bottom of a thick double hedge, sometimes, in the deep heather, or in a tuft of long rushes, in a meadow or a marsh, dry itself, like Gideon's fleece, where all around is moist; sometimes, on the stump of a tree that hangs over a stream, or in the middle of a withy-bed or fir plantation. The female generally lays from eight to twelve light brown eggs, though the first nest I ever found—how well I remember it, as a boy!—beneath a box-bush, in Lord Portman's "Cliff" at Blandford, contained the astonishing number of nineteen. I thought, at first, that two ducks must have laid their eggs in a single nest, as pheasants or partridges will sometimes do, for it was, obviously, impossible that one old bird should cover the whole nineteen. One husband, I thought, might have taken two wives; for I did not know then what I know now, that, while the plebeian tame duck is a polygamist, with a more than Muslim laxity of morals, his patrician original is a strict and staunch monogamist. But I watched, till I was convinced that no second bird had part or parcel in the matter.

The mother, I would remark, sits on her eggs so close and so fearlessly, and her dull dead plumage so nearly resembles the dull dead herbage around her, that, even when you are sure of the position of the nest to within a yard or two, and have frequently visited it before, you have often to look long before you re-discover it, perhaps, by catching sight of the eye; and, sometimes, you cannot find it at all, till the old bird helps you, by getting up from right between your feet. It is noteworthy also that, in not a few instances, the wild duck has been observed so far to depart from her usual habits, as to place her nest high up in a tree, some twenty-five feet from the ground, and, sometimes, even to lay her eggs in the deserted eyrie of a crow or sparrowhawk. In such cases, we must conclude that the mother carries her eager, bustling, hustling young ones to the ground, one by one, as soon as they are born, in her broad, soft bill.

As soon as the duck begins to sit, she begins also to pluck the soft dark down from her breast; and this, as the process of incubation proceeds, rises round her, as she sits, like a boa of the most velvet eider-down. When she leaves her nest, she carefully spreads the down over her eggs, partly for the purpose of concealment, but still more, I

think, of warmth. She is quite intelligent enough to know that a quilt of eider-down is an excellent non-conductor of heat. The male bird, so far as I have observed, never helps her in the process of incubation, nor does he attempt to supply her with food. The absence of so voracious a bird when she does leave the nest for food—and she rarely leaves it by day—must often be prolonged, and her eggs must infallibly be chilled and rendered useless by the night air, if it were not for the special protection she provides for them.

While the duck is thus busily engaged, the drake is to be seen disporting himself at his ease, in company with other drakes whose wives are similarly busy, on a neighbouring sheet of water, or he occasionally takes a flight in a wide circle round the nest, quacking as he goes, apparently, much more to assure his wife that all is right with him, than to assure himself that all is right with her. She sits patiently on, for twenty-one long days, plucking more and more down from her body, till her lower parts are almost bereft of feathers. At last, the young are hatched; and very graceful, innocent, little things, covered with dark down, they are. They leave the nest immediately, and are able to run and swim with surprising agility.

They begin to feed themselves at once, literally scampering over the surface of the water or the weeds, in pursuit of the flies which are to be found upon it.

If, as sometimes happens, the nest is at a distance from the water—I have found it myself a good two miles even from a pond—the mother has the delicate and difficult task of convoying her little brood amidst their two-legged and four-legged enemies, and keeping them together, till they reach the comparative safety of the river. I have often come upon them during the journey ; and few things can be more amusing or more touching than to see the frantic efforts made by the mother to secure the safety of her young, at the imminent risk of her own. Like the partridge or the lapwing, under similar circumstances, she goes tumbling and shuffling along, with one wing hanging down, as if broken, and keeping only a yard or two in front of you, as she draws you away, in spite of yourself—for you know all the time, full well, that it is a ruse—till she feels assured that her ducklings, startled by her first cry of alarm, have had time to scuttle into the nearest ditch or tuft of brushwood, when she flies triumphantly away with pinions easily repaired.

But her maternal anxieties do not cease when the river is reached; for it is some four weeks before the ducklings are able to flap, and it is as much again before the flappers are able to fly. And then comes the fatal first of August—or, as it is, happily, in some counties now, the first of September—when, at the earliest dawn of day, keepers and dogs, farmers and squires, and every one who has the right to handle a gun, and very many who have not, make a combined onslaught upon them. The beginning of the duck-shooting season—though the present state of things is a great improvement on the old, when no protection at all was afforded to the helpless flappers—has, surely, been fixed by the magistrates, in many counties at least, a month too soon. Many of the late broods can only half fly, or cannot fly at all. The mother, in her care for her young, always falls the first victim; the birds have not yet been “stubbling,” and are therefore hardly worth the eating; they have hardly a chance of escape. This, surely, is a negation of all true sport. It is a massacre of the innocents—Rachel perishing *with* her children—“a slaughter of water-rats,” as Colonel Hawker, the great authority on wild-fowl shooting, once expressed it, rather than the manly

and invigorating pursuit of wild and wary birds, where the chances are three to one in favour of the bird. Is it too much to hope that all who read this chapter, if they have any influence at all in the matter, or if they have any love for Nature, or any love for sport, will press for a prolongation of the close time, in all counties alike?

The semi-domesticated wild duck, if she is a fond, is not always a wise, mother. In other words, like other mothers, she loves her young ones not wisely, but too well. Throughout the live-long summer day, for reasons best known to herself, she keeps them on the move, hustling them about from one place to another, with an air of fussy maternal importance, and she is painfully perturbed if she either sees or hears one of her brood lagging behind the rest. *If* she sees or hears, I say; for, unfortunately, with all her wisdom, she cannot count. With her, out of sight and out of hearing is out of mind; and so, one after another, her nurslings, often quite unnoticed by her, lag behind in sheer exhaustion, and fall victims to the rat or the cat, or tumble into a crack in the ground, or lie down to die, entangled in the tall grass. The brood thus gets small by degrees and anything but beautifully less; and I used to

deem myself happy if, at the end of a few weeks, out of a hatch of twelve, some three or four ducklings remained alive. It is to be hoped that here, as elsewhere in Nature, there is a "survival of the fittest."

The greatest peculiarity of the wild duck remains to be noticed. Towards the close of the breeding season, the drake, who has, hitherto, shirked all his anxieties and responsibilities in so shameful a manner, has to undergo a period of sore Lenten humiliation. He doffs all the bravery of his green and white and chocolate attire; the beautiful curled feathers of his tail fall off; and he dons instead the sober and sombre livery of his much-enduring and neglected mate.

Throughout the month of July, even a practised eye can scarcely distinguish the drake from the duck. It is a humiliation shared by some other members of the same tribe, such as the still more gorgeous Carolina and Mandarin, but by no other species in existence. What is the cause of this strange metamorphosis, this total eclipse? We cannot tell. Is it that the brilliancy of his plumage would expose him, during the later moulting period when he can hardly fly, to unusual dangers? Or, is it that Dame Nature, indignant at his selfishness

and self-complacency, endeavours thus to redress the balance between the sexes? But other birds, not less brilliant, need a like protection during the moulting season and, certainly, do not get it; and, if Nature does, indeed, take so severe a view of the failings of the male sex in the duck tribe, why does she pass over the selfishness and the brutality of the male sex in other and much higher orders of beings, in the human race, for instance? Is it possible that there is an analogy between this freak of Nature and that other still more extraordinary one, which, in various ages of the world, and, in countries as remote from each other as Corsica from China, leads a man, while his wife is undergoing her confinement, himself to take to his bed, to receive therefrom the congratulations of his friends, to undergo pangs which, whether from some mysterious sympathy or not, do not seem to be wholly imaginary, and to continue there a close prisoner, long after his wife has risen from her couch and has resumed her household duties? Again, I say, I cannot tell. When we are able to explain the mystery of the *Couvade*, we may also be able to explain the metamorphosis of the duck. Then, but not, perhaps, till then.

I have remarked that the wild duck, when

full grown and at its best, is one of the most wary of all our wild creatures. Hence the keenness of the true sportsman to circumvent it, as best he may; and hence, also, the intrinsic superiority, as I regard it, of wild-fowl shooting to all other forms of British sport, outside the limits of the deer forest or the grouse moor. You may, no doubt, for the purposes of concealment, put up a circle of furze, or a curtain of hurdles and sedge, upon the bank of a river much frequented by wild fowl, and so, when the autumnal migration is taking place, or in a sudden access of bad weather, get a few easy shots at the birds, as they fly past you, or as they ride upon the water. But it will be only a few; for they soon learn to give a wide berth to the suspicious spot, and take care to fly up or down stream, at a distance of a hundred yards or more away; and you will do well frequently to shift your screen and vary its form, if you do not wish to return home from a stalk or a "stand" empty-handed. A waterman may be working all day long, as I have often observed, in the water-meadows of the River Frome, at Stafford, or at Lewel, in Dorsetshire, with shovel and pickaxe, barely a stone's throw from a large flock of wigeon, teal, and wild ducks, and they will take no notice

at all of him ; for they know that he means them no harm. But let a sportsman enter the meadows and hide his gun ever so carefully, and make himself ever so small, it is ten to one, that they will rise in a cloud, when he is some four gunshots away from them, and take themselves off to a place of greater safety. Before a flight of wild ducks—a “drift” of wild fowl, as the country folk expressively call it—alights upon a meadow or on a sheet of water, they fly round in wide circles, perhaps a dozen of them, high in air, each succeeding circle being rather narrower and rather nearer to the ground, as though, with their extraordinary keenness of scent, and sight, and hearing, they would explore every inch of earth, and air, and water in the neighbourhood, and make sure of discovering any lurking foe. And when, at last, they do alight, it is generally upon a spot where the river is almost level with its banks, and where those banks themselves are open and free from herbage or bushes, so that they can command every approach. And, then, to creep forth from the kindly hedge in which you have doubled yourself up and watched the whole process ; to crawl on hands or knees, or almost on your stomach, for a quarter of a mile or so, along the soaking or

the freezing ground, availing yourself of any slight depression, or of any friendly bush, or hatch, or watercourse ; to hear, or overhear, the low, confidential cackling of the unsuspecting wild fowl on the water, and the loud beating of your own heart, as, in a state of nervous excitement, half painful, half pleasurable, you get nearer and nearer, till you calculate that you are, now, two gunshots, now, a gunshot and a half, and, now, just one gunshot, from the spot where you saw them alight ; then, to spring suddenly to your feet, and, as the birds rise in loud tumult and confusion, with their heads, as they always do, to windward, to bring down, it may be, a right and left, a mallard and his mate—this is sport indeed ; this, in my opinion, is worth a score of tame bred pheasants knocked down with scientific coolness, at the hottest corner in a well-preserved cover. Of course, you will fail in your stalk much oftener than you succeed. The wild duck *will*, in their perversity, nine times out of ten, rise when you are three gunshots off ; but is not the exertion, the endurance, the glow, the enthusiasm of one successful stalk worth all the previous failures—or, rather, would it be worth half as much, if you had not had those previous failures ?

And there is another species of the sport known as "flight shooting," which has charms of its own hardly inferior to that which I have just described. Towards dusk, and, sometimes, for an hour or two afterwards, it is the habit of the wild duck and its fellow water fowl to leave the estuaries or the open sheets of water where they have dozed away the day, and to make for the fresh-water meadows, or the running streams which are their happy hunting-grounds by night. Then, if it be moonlight, and, above all, if the ground be crisp, and the more stagnant watercourses are iron-bound by the severity of the frost, is the time and the place, under the cover of some overhanging bush, alongside of the swiftly flowing river, to take up a "stand" and wait. You may "stand" there, no doubt, and wait till your feet feel as if they were glued to the ground, till your hands are so numbed that you cannot feel your cartridges or your trigger, much less—as I well remember in the days of muzzle, or, as one would rather call them, puzzle-loaders, while you were fumbling helplessly in your pockets — distinguish your shot-belt from your powder-flask, or your wads from your percussion caps. But what a succession of sights and sounds to reward the naturalist and the sportsman! The

moor-hen, the coot, and the water-rail creep forth from their lurking-places in the withy-bed, and, with a cheery note of confidence, call to their fellows to follow their example. The dabchick dives and disports herself, in careless security, on the moonlit water at your very feet. The water-rat scuttles along in the stiff herbage, or, sitting up on his hind legs, cleans his face at leisure. The wild cries of the snipe and the heron, the peewit and the curlew, the golden plover and the sandpiper, birds heard but not seen, startle and charm the silence. It is not for them that you are watching and waiting. A little later, and you catch in the distance the loud whirring of unnumbered wings, you hear the shrill cry of the leading duck or wigeon, anxious, in the gloom, to keep his followers together—and I would remark that all the birds that fly by night have, with this end in view, a loud shrill cry—you just catch sight of them and they are gone; gone, as they fly, three gunshots aloft, towards some more favoured feeding-ground far up the river. But they are followed by others, sometimes by single birds, sometimes by twos or threes, sometimes by a dozen or a score, some of them but half seen, others but half heard. You have one and another snap shot, and you miss.

Presently, a flock of wild geese, Brent or Barnacles, which, driven inland by the cruel weather, you have been watching, half the day, feeding in the middle of a big meadow, far out of reach of friend or foe, come flying up the river, high in air, in the shape of a large V, and cackling cheerily as they wing their way. Irritated, perhaps, by your previous failures, you do what no sportsman should ever do, you fire into the flock in the faint hope that one stray shot may break a wing-bone. A couple of seconds after you have fired, you hear distinctly the half-spent shots rattle harmlessly against the close-set, shot-proof feathers of the breasts of the wild geese; and then, a couple of seconds later, again, you hear them drop sullenly and reproachfully, one after the other, into the glistening water at your feet. Ever and anon, a sharp clean swish into the river, a hundred yards away, tells you that a duck, or a wigeon, or a teal, has passed unseen and unheard by you, and has dropped into the haven where he would be, and you think, half frozen as you are, you might well have chosen a better "stand" or a more lucky night. Last of all, you hear the cries of a big drift of wild fowl coming, as it seems, straight towards you, and, this time, well within range. The air

vibrates. It is alive with the whirring of their wings. You see them clearly for a moment or two, as they speed on in the bright moonlight. This time, you single out your birds; there is a double flash and a double bang, and then, a double heavy lifeless thud in the water, some thirty yards away, tells you that, this time, you have struck home, and your trusty and much-enduring water spaniel soon deposits a pair of wild ducks—again a mallard and his mate—at your feet, and you feel that your patience is more than rewarded.

To pass from the genuine sport involved in a successful or unsuccessful stalk or "stand," to a description of the wholesale massacres perpetrated on the lakes of Mexico by Indians, who, with the help of a masked battery of two tiers of guns, manage, it is said, sometimes to kill twelve hundred ducks at a single discharge; or of the smaller but still considerable slaughter of the decoys, which, though they are much less common in this country than they were, are still to be found in various parts of it, and still send thousands of birds annually to the London market, would probably be felt to be too violent a transition, too great a come-down from that on which I have just dwelt with pleasure. Moreover, the process of constructing

and working a decoy has been so often described that it is unnecessary to attempt to do so again now. I would only remark that, here again, the wariness of the wild duck can only be outwitted by the combined intelligence of a carefully trained dog and man, aye, and of some of the ducks themselves. The elaborate preparation of a sheet of water which is to form the decoy, with its quiet and its isolation, its palings and its plantations, its diverging channels and its diagonal screens of reed, its avenues and its hoops of network, its hempseed and buckwheat, its well broken spaniel, its fatally skilful decoy or "call" ducks, its turf, kept burning to prevent the scent of the decoy man from reaching his prey—all this paraphernalia of precaution is, in itself, a sufficient testimony to the value and to the wide-awakeness of the creature whom they are intended to overreach.

But there is one method of taking wild ducks in considerable numbers, practised in China and in some other semi-civilised countries, which is so amusing in itself, and, I think, so little known, as to deserve a passing notice. The natives take care that a number of large calabashes, or gourds, should always be left floating on the pieces of water frequented by the birds, till they get to regard

them as part and parcel of their resorts. The duck-hunter chooses his time, and, putting one of the calabashes, with holes cut for his mouth and eyes, upon his head, wades through the lake, taking care to keep the whole of his body well beneath the surface. He cautiously approaches the unsuspecting wild fowl, and, catching one of them by the leg, pulls him, with a sudden jerk, beneath the water, causing hardly more commotion of the surface than the duck itself often makes when it dives, or plashes, or plunges for its food. He wrings its neck and fastening it to his belt, deals with another and another in the same fashion, till he makes his retreat, equally unnoticed, with a whole girdle of captured wild ducks around his waist!

George Eliot, as I have mentioned in an earlier chapter, describes Tom Tulliver as being, like many boys, "fond of birds—fond, that is, of throwing stones at them." The naturalist Buffon finishes his account of the robin redbreast with the somewhat ambiguous remark, "This amiable little warbler is eaten with breadcrumbs." If, like Buffon, while writing this chapter on the wild duck, my thoughts have, occasionally, strayed to its dainty flavour, when properly served up with lemon and cayenne; if, as Tom Tulliver might well have done,

I have finished up the chapter by dwelling with enthusiasm on the joys of its pursuit, I have not done so, solely or chiefly, because he is difficult to kill and delicate to eat. To observe minutely the habits of all wild animals, to try to understand them, to sympathise with them, to find the hand of the Creator in all the creatures of His hand; this, assuredly, is better, more elevating, more inspiring, than to take life either for the purposes of sport or food.

But, on the other hand, I am equally persuaded from long personal experience, that an enthusiastic love of nature and a genuine love of sport may often go hand in hand. A naturalist need not necessarily be a sportsman. He may hate—as indeed he often does—the very name of sport; but a man cannot be a true sportsman who is not also first a true naturalist, for the simple reason that a true sportsman is never a butcher—he hates killing, merely as killing. He cares far more for the freshness of the air, for the fragrance of the heather, for the grass laden with dew, for the dancing sparkle of the stream, for the myriad beauties of the moor, the forest, or the stubble-field; for the “working” and evident enjoyment of his dogs; for the engrossing interest, and, therefore,

for the complete rest from work which it gives to a busy man ; for the health, the strength, the skill, the energy, the endurance called for by his favourite pursuit, and increased by it in turn, than for the mere brute weight of his bag. In other words, as in almost every other pursuit that is really valuable, with him the chase is worth more than the game, the process itself and its accompaniments than the results.

CHAPTER VII

A DAY ON A NORFOLK MERE

A FEW years ago, while I was still in full work at Harrow, a letter reached me from Mr Henry Upcher, a friend till then unknown to me, inviting me to spend such portion of the next whole holiday as I could, with him, and with his and my feathered friends in Norfolk. "I have heard," he said, "from my boy in your Form, that you are very fond of natural history; would you care to make a long journey to visit a great place for wild fowl near here? There are several sorts of duck to be found, and there are, sometimes, a pair or two of great crested grebes, besides other birds." It was a tempting offer. I had always been particularly fond of the wild duck and his kindred; and I had tried, with more or less success, for some years past, to domesticate them in two small ponds, in my

garden at Harrow. Here was a chance of seeing them, at last, in their native haunts, and that, too, at the very "height of the season." On the other hand, the place was at least a hundred miles away, and a hundred miles seemed a long way to go for a bird's nest. I should have eight hours of travelling and only about four of bird's-nesting. However, I made up my mind that it was worth while; and after reaching the end of our railway journey, we had still a drive of six miles to the "happy hunting-ground." Our road lay, at first, through a sandy waste, capable of supporting nothing but rabbits, and peopled with nothing but them; and very hard put to it must even rabbits have been for a bare subsistence, till the warm weather and the delicious rains of the preceding few days gave fresh life to the grass, which we could almost see growing greener and longer as we passed by. On both sides of the road, on every hillock and post of vantage, there was a rabbit basking in the sun, or cleaning, with his innocent paws, his still more innocent face. I always wonder, by the way, how that mysterious process accomplishes anything at all, and whether it is the paws that clean the face, or the face that cleans the paws; but let that pass.

These barren stretches were succeeded by half-cultivated fields, and by forest-like woods, in all the glory of their fresh and varied greenery, the first green of the larch struggling hard, as it always seems to me to do, for the prize of beauty with the first green of the opening beech. The country swarmed with feathered as well as with four-footed game. In every field were to be seen three or four pairs of partridges, English and red-legged, scampering, one after the other, in the full enjoyment of their first love, and fancying, as what young lovers do not, and is it not right that they should? that the world is made for love and for them. I remarked upon their extraordinary number: "Yes," said my host quietly, "I was shooting here, one day, and we had eight guns posted along that line of bushes you see between those two fields. At the first drive we killed forty-seven and a half brace, and, in the return drive over the same place, when the birds came rather slower, as the red-legs always do when they are tired with their first long flight, we killed fifty-seven brace!" This was slaughter enough for any one; but my friend, like all true sportsmen, is at least as keen for watching wild life and for preserving it, as for taking it away; and I incline to think that, as in my own case, so in

his, a good day's bird-nesting is as red letter a day in his calendar, as a good day's partridge driving.

At last we reached the scene of our operations. It was a sheet of water about three-quarters of a mile long and one quarter broad, artificially made, so I was told, some forty years ago, by damming up a stream which, clear as crystal, still rushes from its lower end. It is in the middle of the Norfolk flats; but it breaks, as if by Nature's hand, into numerous islands and creeks, and is girt in, now by rolling heather, or bracken, or meadow, and now, in the near distance, by stretches of woodland which send down inviting belts of trees to its very margin.

“Onward amid the copse 'gan peep,
A narrow inlet still and deep,
Affording scarce such breadth of brim
As served the wild duck's brood to swim,
Lost for a space, through thickets veering,
But broader, when again appearing.”

The first glance was disappointing, so far as our immediate object was concerned; for the sun was shining brightly on the water, there was a brisk ripple upon it, and we could only discern a solitary bird or two floating about in the further distance. But, presently, a coot sailed out from his lurking place

in the bordering sedge; a wild duck or two flew over our heads, and dropped with a "swish" into the mid-water; and a good opera-glass, and a powerful telescope which my friend had brought with him, soon served to brighten the prospect, and to people even the remoter corners of the solitude with feathered life. First, I think, we managed to descry a gadwall, then a pair of teal, then, here and there, a pochard, next, two or three pairs of tufted ducks, and then, a solitary male of the pintailed duck, with his long curved tail-feathers, swimming, in stately solicitude, up and down in front of an island of reeds, which, it was probable, contained his mate and nest. Presently my friend handed the glass to me and said, "Look at that slope of grass beyond the distant tussocks of rushes." I did so, and the smooth emerald-green soon resolved itself into something still better; for it proved to be dotted with some thirty gorgeous mallards, some of them basking in the sun, some preening themselves in all their glorious spring apparel, and some fast asleep with their heads nestling under their wings. Each one of these has, in all probability, a mate sitting hard upon her eggs, within the distance of a mile or two, or bustling about, like other mothers, solicitously with

her young family, who pull her this way and that, with their unresting activities and their whims, till she seems almost distracted with the toil and moil of their young life, while their father is lazily enjoying his own perfections, and, once or twice in the course of the day, will, perhaps, condescend to take a short flight in her direction, and gratify her, in the middle of her labours and anxieties, with a distant sight of his splendid plumage. Almost every part of the lake soon revealed a pair or two of wild fowl. In one corner, far away, there is what my friend pronounces, with his naked and much-practised eye, to be a male shoveller duck ; and, as you turn the glass in that direction, you descry the strange flaps of his mandibles, the brilliant blue upon his wing, and the chocolate upon his breast, and you even see, or fancy that you see, the bright yellow rim around his eye.

And now our imaginations are sufficiently whetted for our work. A messenger had been sent on to the gamekeeper, whose house is visible, a quarter of a mile beyond the upper end of the water, and commands a view of the whole, to warn him of our arrival ; but we begin the work of the day without him. We cross a bit of meadow land damasked with cuckoo flowers, with cowslips, and

with marsh marigolds. The lapwings sweep around us, tumbling over and over in the air, and showing by their near approach, as well as by their peculiar cry, that some of their eggs have *not* found their way to the breakfast or the dinner table, and that, somewhere in the fast-growing grass, there are lurking some of those dainty little birds which, happily for themselves, are born with the full power of locomotion, and sometimes, it is said, run off the nest with a bit of the eggshell still clinging to their backs. Up springs the snipe from his marshy bed, and tells us, by his loud drumming noise, which nobody, I believe, has ever been yet able properly to explain, that he, too, early breeder as he is, feels in a like predicament of parental pride and responsibility.

We now enter the willow beds, which are alive with the slender forms and the harsh jarring notes of the sedge and reed warblers who have arrived too recently to have begun the work of the season. We tap each tuft of rushes gently with our sticks, and, presently, a bird sneaks out of a clump of sedgy grass, a few yards ahead of us, in that mysterious way, which proclaims aloud that a nest and eggs are left behind. It is a black-headed bunting's nest, as five richly-streaked eggs of olive show.

Another clump, a little further on, produces another nest of the same species, and a third, a third; each with the same number of eggs. Careless, by this time, about wetting our feet and legs, we move down close to the border of the water, and from a rushy tussock, in a peninsula of sedge, a bald-headed coot drops, with a loud flop, into the water from her huge nest, which she has piled higher and higher, as the water rose with the recent rains, till it is at least a couple of feet above low-water mark. It contains nine eggs, about half as big again as a moorhen's, with a light brown ground, mottled with black. A few minutes later, and a duck, which I had never seen upon the wing before, starts up from beneath my feet. It is a gadwall or dun-bird, and she leaves behind her eleven pinkish eggs, whose strong odour, together with the abundance of soft down with which they are encircled, proclaims that each one of them contains a duckling which is already very much alive, and which, if you were to break the shell, would be soon ready to take to the water and become food, as so many of them do, for the pike, the water-rat, or the fox. It is a nest that I have never seen before, and I feel that, even if I find no other rare nest to-day, my journey of a hundred miles will not have been in vain.

Meanwhile, the gamekeeper is making his way towards us, as we are warned by the thunderous rising from their siesta of the thirty mallards, who fly quacking high over our heads, without a single female among them. In his smart velvet coat, and his waistcoat of the most brilliant scarlet, the gamekeeper looks almost as gorgeous as the birds over whom he watches, and a few words with him show that he is the "right man in the right place"; in other words, that he is a naturalist as well as gamekeeper, taking a keen interest in all the sights and sounds around him, bent on saving life as well as taking it, and not regarding indiscriminately, as vermin to be nailed to his ghastly gibbet, all those noble birds of prey which are the natural denizens of a wild country, which add so much to its charm, and which, as even the most stolid of game-preservers are now beginning to discover, serve a useful purpose in Nature, far outweighing the loss, in hard times, of a few head of game. So backward is the season, he tells us, that we are too early, by a week or fortnight, for the great majority of the nests of the waterfowl. He has, however, while collecting pheasants' eggs, come across a few which he may be able to find again for us, and, in any case, if we continue our search

we are sure to come upon others. His master, too, Lord Walsingham, as is well known, is worthy, if anyone, of being lord of such a Paradise of Birds ; for he is an enthusiastic naturalist, fond of everything that lives, and has often spent the greater part of the night in the open air, in the hope that he may capture some rare nocturnal moth. He will not, so it is said, have a keeper on his estate who does not love his surroundings ; and hence the amazing difference between our friend, who has eyes for everything and enjoyment too, and the vast majority of that purblind and murderous race who, with Nature's richest treasures around them, and monarchs of all they survey, observe nothing, spare nothing, care for nothing, but the great annual battue. He has just had a bitter disappointment. The red-headed wigeon is the most shy of a race of birds that are proverbially shy, and has been accustomed to visit the water only in the winter months, retiring to his native northern climes to breed. Two years ago, his master procured some female wigeon, which he pin-winged, hoping that they might induce the males to remain throughout the summer. The plan succeeded for the time ; and, till a few days ago, there was a fair number of both male and

female wigeon here, which seemed to have taken to the place in permanence; but then, alas, the hereditary instinct, transmitted through countless generations, again broke out, and they were all off to Norway or to Iceland, not, apparently, to return until late in the ensuing autumn. So there will be no wigeon's nest for us to-day.

We go on, however, in good heart, and soon light upon a second gadwall's nest with thirteen eggs. Here, or hereabouts, it is that the keeper fancies that he saw a teal slip off her nest the other day. We search carefully, and, presently, off she slips again, and flaps along the water, with one wing hanging down, as if broken, hoping to lure us away from the neighbourhood. But we are, all of us, too old birds to be caught with that kind of chaff. The nest contains eleven eggs of a light olive grey colour, and, though the process of incubation is far advanced, there is no trace of down about them; an exception to a rule otherwise universal, I believe, in the duck tribe, which I have never observed before. Not far off, in a tuft of rushes, we come across a small flat nest about the size of a soup-plate, all ready for eggs, which I take to be an exceptionally small moorhen's, but the keeper pronounces to be none other than

a water-rail's! The water-rail very rarely stays to breed in this country during the summer, and the wonder is that she and her near relative, the land-rail, which is, of course, a summer visitant, with their very slender powers of flight, hardly able to surmount even a moderate hedge, can ever live to cross the streak of "melancholy," or of lively ocean, which separates us from our nearest neighbours; much more to reach the shores, as, I believe, they ultimately do, of Africa. So convinced, indeed, are the country folk in Dorset that they cannot cross the sea, that I have been often gravely assured by them that they never do so, and that the water-rail of the winter turns into the land-rail of the summer months! It is true, of course, that some birds, in their summer plumage, such as the ptarmigan, differ widely from the winter; but the rustic forgets that it is hardly possible for a semi-aquatic bird ever to become a land one, and that it is quite impossible for the long curving beak of the water-rail to change annually into the short stout beak of the land-rail. Happy will he be who, if the nest turns out to be a water-rail's, gets a sample of its eggs! It would be well worth a second journey of a hundred miles to get them.

We now leave, for a time, the sheet of water,

and follow up, for half a mile or so, the course of the stream that runs into it. It flows through a heathy bottom, enclosed, on one side, by a rich deep wood, in which a perfect chorus of songsters are doing their best for us—the nightingale and the blackcap, the whitethroat and the willow wren among the most prominent. We have no time to look for nests such as theirs to-day, nor have they, as yet, well begun to build; but a little whinchat steals away from some long rushy grass in the heather in front of us, and reveals five blue eggs—not sky blue, like the hedge sparrow's, though they look so, at first sight, but mottled all over, at the larger end, with infinitesimal brown spots. We reach another small piece of water in a hollow, which we do not see till we are close upon it. The bog here is deeper and more treacherous than any we have yet traversed, and the keeper warns us to be careful, for, if we once break through the comparatively firm crust of mud and rushes at the top, we shall be up to our middles, or our necks, or further still, before we can raise a cry for help. This seems to be the favourite breeding ground of the water birds. You leap from one tussock of pampas-like grass to another, at the imminent risk of a sudden submersion, and on three

of these tussocks, within a radius of not more than twenty yards, are no less than three wild ducks' nests, one still tenanted by the anxious mother, while the other two have already sent their broods into the world. One of them contains two addled eggs, which the keeper has carefully poisoned—an act which, surely, is always and everywhere to be condemned—in the hope of killing a carrion crow, a bird of prey for which he has no bowels of compassion. Close by, too, a beautiful shoveller duck is sitting on her whitish eggs, the first specimen of the nest and eggs which I have ever been privileged to see. She tumbles about, as if badly shot, as she half flies, half limps away. She has been sitting on eleven eggs, ten of them her own, and one, that of a pheasant! It is a peculiarity of the pheasant as of some other semi-domesticated birds, that, like the cuckoo, she will often drop her egg into the nest of another bird; but, unlike the cuckoo, the nest she selects or happens to meet with is, sometimes, not that which is best suited for the wants of her offspring. Poor little pheasant! It will not have many hours of life, nor much ground to run over during them, for, as its foster brothers slip off the tussock into the water which surrounds it, it will be bound to follow

them, and its first step will, probably, also be its last.

In the water of this smaller pond, about a yard from the bank, I observe a heap of green weeds piled, one upon another, to a foot in height, as you sometimes see them in a river which has been lately mown. I carelessly turn over the topmost layer with my stick, and, to my delight, I see six dirty white eggs beneath. The old bird has heard us coming, and, in a moment, has covered up her eggs and dived deep into the water, nor do we see a trace of her. The eggs are those of the dab-chick, or lesser grebe, a nest which I have never seen since I was at my first school at Blandford, some thirty-five years ago. It was there that I learned to love birds, and so hit upon what has been, and is, and, I trust, always will be, a ruling passion of my life.

Among the wilder game birds which I have mentioned, there is no lack of the more domesticated, the pheasant and the partridge. We stumble upon their nests in every direction. Sometimes a pheasant flies off from right beneath our feet, with a hurry-scurry which makes us fear that she will not return again to her eggs, unless she has begun to sit hard upon them. The keeper will come back, in the evening, to see if she is "at home," and if not,

will carry off her eggs to the incubator, or his brood hens. One pheasant, when she had risen some fifteen feet into the air, dropped an egg, whether it was that, in her hurry, she had caught it up in her claws or feathers, or whether we had intruded upon her in the very act of laying. We all saw the egg fall; but we searched for it in vain, for it had buried itself deep in the muddy ooze. In more than one instance, a pheasant is sitting on the bare ground, with hardly a spray of withered bracken to cover her; but so like is her sombre plumage to that of the soil on which she sits, that we might have crushed her and her rising hopes together, had not the keeper, with his sharper eyes, called us aside just in time. Up springs a partridge from her nest, with that tremendous whirring of wings, out of all proportion to her size, which, by the start it gives you, so often makes you miss an otherwise easy shot. A little further on, the keeper steps aside to see how another partridge's nest, which he has long watched, is getting on. The eggs, alas, are sucked, or scattered in every direction round the nest. He gazes ruefully at the ruin. "What has done it?" I ask. "It is a hedgehog, the most mischieffull vermin that there is; he never touches a nest till

the bird has begun to sit, and then all the eggs which he does not eat are spoiled ; I will give him a dose of poison to-night." I have often pleaded for, and have often saved, this quaint and interesting, and often quite harmless, little animal from a murderous keeper's heels ; but I feel, in this instance, where the destruction is so great and the guilt so evident, it would be useless to say a word in his defence.

We now come down again to the big sheet of water, intending, as we return, to search carefully its opposite side. The water here is much deeper between the tussocks of sedge, and we are often up to our knees in it. The island in which we had suspected that the pin-tailed duck would be laying, turned out to be quite inaccessible. We had not found yet a tufted duck's nest ; but just as it occurred to me that we had not done so, there rose, first, one female, then a second, and then a third of this beautifully pied bird from a thick reed-bed about twenty yards behind us. We thought that there must be three nests, but, in so difficult a spot, we were satisfied when we succeeded in discovering one, containing nine eggs. This ended the list of my *new* finds. We moved several wild ducks who had already hatched their eggs, and who tried to

distract our attention from their brood, as they scuttled along in hot haste, and with their loud baby-chirping, over the surface of the water. We came across other moorhen's and coot's nests, of which we now took little account; and a third gadwall's nest put a good finish to our search; for four o'clock had come, and it was full time to lunch, and then move towards Harrow.

The sedge warbler and the reed warbler, the woodpecker and the nightingale, the cuckoo and the cuckoo's mate again made their presence felt, as we lunched on the banks of the stream, whence we had taken our first survey in the morning. And now the keeper has one more, and that not the least object of interest, to show us before we leave. It is a thing which not even he, with all his life-long experience, has ever seen before, a pheasant's nest in a tree! His son had climbed, the other day, a slender thorn bush, grown round with ivy, to what he thought was a wood-pigeon's nest, and there, at the height of eleven feet from the ground, all told, he had found a pheasant sitting! What freak of nature can have induced a bird, which, except during the hours of sleep, is so essentially terrestrial, to aspire to such an eminence? The ground below was marshy, but it was just such

a kind of marsh as a pheasant loves. Is it possible that news had reached her of the terrible floods that had devastated so many parts of the world during the last few months preceding, the Hoang Ho in China, the Oder and the Maine in Germany, the Theiss in Hungary, the Guadalquiver in Spain, and, last of all, the Mississippi in North America, and did she fear a like outburst on the part of the "reedy Cam" and "the gentle Ouse"? I know not; but this I know, that the earlier explorers of South America can hardly have been more surprised when they found the Indians of the Orinoco region, living, during the period of its annual devastating flood, like birds, in the branches of gigantic trees, for months together, than was the gamekeeper, when he found one of his pheasants selecting so strange a perch for the birth of her future family. With this sight was brought to a conclusion the more enjoyable part of a whole holiday, spent in what most of those who read this chapter will now, I think, agree with me in calling a very Paradise of Birds.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAGPIE

THE magpie is, with the one exception of the jay, the most striking in colour and the most graceful in form of all the members of the crow tribe. For reasons which are not far to seek, connected with his numerous enemies, he is nowhere exactly a common bird in England; while, for reasons connected with his individuality, he is, happily, nowhere quite unknown. There are few inhabitants of a country district who have not caught, at least, a distant view of his unmistakable shape and movements and flight; and there are equally few inhabitants of a town who have not, at some time or other, seen a ghastly mockery of the wild bird, sorely mutilated and bedraggled, but still attractive withal, hung up, it may be, in a small cage against a wall, in a back court, and condemned to make

sorry sport, like the captive Samson among the Philistines—while he can have no spark of merriment within himself—for the casual onlooker or passer by. A caged eagle whose flashing eye is sadly eloquent of the far-away mountain tops, of pinnacles of rock untrodden by man, or of the boundless spaces of the air of heaven, is hardly a more melancholy spectacle than is a magpie, whose nature it is to be always on the move, always flitting from bush to bush, or taking huge bounds over lawn and lea, always inquisitive, always on the alert, always cheery, confined for life within a few square feet of space, with, perhaps, only one perch to vary his position, his tail torn and broken against his prison bars, deprived of half its length and of all its beauty, the brilliant white of his body begrimed with dust and dirt, till it has become a sullen grey, and its iridescent and metallic shades of blue, purple, bronze, and violet, reduced, to all appearance, to one sordid and sombre black. The cry of Sterne's starling, "I can't get out, I can't get out!" is, to him who knows and loves the character of the magpie, the pathetic undersong of every cramped and feverish movement of his body, and of every humorous make-believe of his lissom and well-trained tongue and throat.



MAGPIE.

From a Drawing by G. E. Lodge.

[To face p. 282.]



Let us first look a little more closely at the form and plumage of the bird, when he is fresh from his native haunts ; and then try to picture to ourselves, what is more important and interesting still, something of his life-history, of his habits and his aptitudes, something, in short, of the heart and the brain—the latter, as in all the crow tribe, very highly developed—which lie “behind the feathers.”

It is difficult, except at the breeding season, to get nearer to the magpie than eighty to a hundred yards ; and, at that distance, he appears a simple mixture of black and white, each colour laid on in broad and effective, and, therefore, conspicuous patches, much as is the case with the oyster-catcher or sea-pye, the scaup and the tufted duck, the shel-drake and the merganser. But take him in your hand when he has just been caught, or killed, by his deadly enemy the gamekeeper ; or, better still, watch him from the distance of a few yards only, as you can do in Norway—where he is a prime favourite, a chartered libertine with everybody, and, indeed, is almost domesticated—and observe how deftly these two ground colours are intermixed, and how delicately they are shot with other tints as the light glances across them. The head, the neck, and the upper breast are a glossy black, the prevailing

colour of most of the crow tribe. The secondary feathers of the wing and the back are also black, but resplendent with bands of bright green, shading off into purple, blue, and deeper green. The lower breast and the under parts are pure white of the softest texture, and so are the graceful inner webs of the flight feathers.

Even thus far, the magpie will strike you as a bird of almost matchless beauty, but its greatest and most conspicuous ornament of all is, its tail. The tail is considerably longer than the whole of the rest of his body, beak and all, and when the bird throws it jauntily upwards to keep it out of the damp grass, or uses it to help him steer his way in his wavering, uncertain flight from plantation to plantation, it expands into the loveliest and most exquisitely shaped of fans. The two centre feathers are the longest, and of exactly equal length, while four others on each side shelve off in gradually descending scale, the whole of them aglow with half the colours of the rainbow.

The eyes of the magpie are of a moderate size, but bright as bright can be ; and its large and well-formed nostrils, covered, like those of the raven, with reversed feathers or bristles, doubtless, help him much to discover his lurking prey. The beak is

strong and sharp, capable alike of breaking the strongest snail shell, of neatly spitting and carrying off an egg, or of giving a severe nip to any hand which meddles with it. It has extraordinary muscular strength of leg, which it delights to use, not so much by a sedate and stately walk, as do its nearest relations, the raven, the crow, the rook, and the jackdaw, as by leaps and bounds of surprising length. I well remember a magpie, with its wing just tipped by shot, but otherwise unhurt, which I came on unexpectedly in a copse, called Bunker's Hill at Stafford, some forty years ago. It bounded along a ride, for thirty or forty yards, as fast as, or faster than, I could run. But the exertion of continued leaping, even in animals especially constructed for it, from a flea or a grasshopper to a frog, a jerboa, or a kangaroo, is so great that it must, comparatively soon, come to an end. Each successive leap becomes shorter than the one before it, till the leap becomes a walk, and the walk, a crawl, and that soon ends in complete exhaustion. Try the experiment for yourself—if you are unlucky enough to find one—with a flea upon a sheet, or with a grasshopper, or a frog upon a lawn. Even a toad, when disturbed, will at first give one or two apologies for a hop; but they completely exhaust his

energies, and he resumes his usual crawl. So was it with the magpie. I managed to keep him alive for a time. He became tame enough, but never developed any of the amusing qualities, the powers of mischief, the talking feats which characterise magpies brought up from the nest. He was, in fact, like so many of us, too old—too old to learn.

There are few birds whose habits have changed more or more rapidly, with the changing times, than those of the magpie. He has learned—a sure mark of high intelligence—how “to keep pace” with them, and to adapt himself to circumstances. Observers of nature, of a century or so ago, speak of him, with hardly an exception, as one of the most familiar and friendly of birds, fond of man and of his works, and never far removed from them, haunting the rickyard, searching the “mixon” for food, perching on the barn top, the occasional companion, and not always the enemy, of the hens, the ducks, and the pigeons of the farmyard, his huge nest constructed on one of the old ash trees or elms which hem the homestead in, conspicuous yet secure. He was, in short, in England then, very much what he is in Norway now, a canny or uncanny bird, who might know a little too much of

the private history and prospects of the farmer and his family, their births, their marriages, and their deaths, but still, on the whole, a friend to be respected, to be entertained, and never to be molested, or molested only at the farmer's personal peril.

Now all that is changed. He is always cheery still, but is yet the most suspicious and wary of birds, eye and ear always open, ready to detect, not so much the presence of his lurking prey, as the presence of his lurking foe. The gun and the pole-trap and poison and the other gruesome stock-in-trade of the gamekeeper have driven him off from all "well-preserved"—or, as I would rather call them, from a natural-history point of view, from all "ill destroyed"—estates: from all estates, that is, in which every larger animal which is not game, or which is not preserved for hunting, is dubbed "vermin"—a name which ought to be reserved for the most noxious and noisome of insects—and is, as far as possible, promptly and unscrupulously destroyed. It must be freely admitted that the gamekeeper has more excuse for persecuting the magpie and his near relation, the carrion crow, than he has for destroying other noble and interesting birds, such as hawks and owls; for,

during two or three months of the year, when he has five or six growing young to feed, he is an active and skilful birds'-nester, sparing neither eggs, nor callow, nor fully fledged young birds. But that his misdeeds, even during these three months, are much exaggerated is clear, I think, from two facts : first, that in Norway, and in other countries where he is protected and domiciled, there is no lack of young ducks, young poultry, and young pigeons running loose ; and secondly, because smaller birds never seem to regard him as their natural enemy, never mob him as rooks or swallows and martins will mob a hawk or cuckoo ; or as starlings, black-birds, and thrushes will, in their ignorance and presumption, mob the stranger and belated owl. A magpie, with his very small wings and uncertain flight, could not catch any full-grown bird upon the wing, even if he would. Charles Waterton congratulates himself that he had thirty-four nests of the magpie, in one year, in his park, implying a sum total, when all had reared their young in safety, of some 200 birds ; and yet nobody who knows the facts will deny that other birds also, of almost every possible variety, and in exceptionally large numbers, including partridges and pheasants, were to be found in his domains.

Observe the habits of the magpie closely, through a glass if possible, during any of the nine remaining months of the year. A bicycle, run between two high hedges, will sometimes enable you to become the unseen guest of a whole family, disporting themselves by the roadside. What is yonder magpie tugging at in the middle of the pasture? It is a huge earth-worm, clinging as hard as he can cling for dear life, to the mother earth, which still protects two-thirds of him. The magpie drags him from his lair, and, swallowing him piecemeal, hops off in quest of others. What is that other magpie doing, not pulling but pecking hard at something in the hedge-bank hard by? Mark the place as exactly as you can, go straight to it, and you will find the fragments of big snail shells, still sticky with the slime of their just-devoured tenants. Others of the brood are zig-zagging over the grass, or flitting from bush to bush, prying into every nook and cranny, and picking up, now grubs and caterpillars in abundance, now a mouse, now a frog, now seeds and berries from the hedgerow. The father, meanwhile, or more probably, the mother, anxious for, yet rejoicing, like Diana among her nymphs, in the presence of her numerous and beautiful progeny, beautiful as

herself, stands sentinel on the topmost twig of some neighbouring ash tree, her lustrous tail waving gracefully up and down, never from side to side, as the breeze catches it, much as does that of a butcher bird, perched on a similar coign of vantage, or of a water wagtail, scuttling over the freshly mown lawn, or among the stones of the rippling brook. Weigh in the balance, if such things ever can be weighed, the beauty and interest and cheeriness of the bird, and the good he does, during three quarters of the year against any mischief he may do, during the remaining one quarter, by somewhat lessening the number of pheasants or partridges which are to be slaughtered at the annual battue, and say which scale will kick the beam.

A word or two upon the name of magpie and other local appellations given to this sprightly bird. The subject, like most etymological questions in natural history, is of interest in more ways than one, and its investigation throws light upon the historic character of the bird. "Pie," or, as it used to be spelt, "pye," is the Latin *pica*, a bird which, as early as the time of Ovid, who was a real observer of birds—the best, I think, in the whole range of classical literature—was believed to have the power

of mimicking anything it liked, *imitantes omnia picæ*.

*"Pica loquax certâ dominum te voce saluto,
Si me non videas esse negabis avem."*

It took the form of "pyot" in Scotland, where the oyster-catcher, which is so like it in plumage, so unlike it in character, is still called the sea-pyot, —of pyanot in Northumberland, of pynot in Lancashire. "I saigh," so ran the Lancashire dialect, the Lancashire spelling, the Lancashire belief, in the year 1775, "I saigh two rotten pynots (hong 'um), that wur a sign of bad fashin, for I heard my gronny say houd oss leef o' seen two owd Harries oss two pynots." As for "mag," the other half of the name, it was given as a term of familiarity, probably also of endearment, half felt and half pretended; pretended, in order to avert the evil consequences which might result from any expression of the opposite, just as the Greeks, by way of disarming the Furies, called them the "kindly goddesses," or, as they dubbed the ill-omened left hand, the "well-named." Mag is short for Madge or Margaret, which, in its turn, comes from the Latin *margarita*, a pearl. The original form of the magpie's name was

magoty-pie or magot-pye, as we find in Shakespeare :

“The raven rook'd her in the chimney-top,
And magot-pyes in dismal discords sung ;”

and in other early writers :

“I neither tattle with jackdaw,
Nor magot-pyes in thatched house straw.”

In fact, men called the pye a magot-pye, or magpie, much as we call a daw a jack-daw, a parrot a poll parrot, a tit a tom-tit, a wren a jenny wren, a redbreast a Robin redbreast. It should be noted that the magpie is, or was, called in Kent the “haggister,” a term of which I have no explanation to offer, unless indeed it is either a corruption of eggister, the “haig-eatingest” bird, as it is supposed to be, or is connected with Aglaster, the Old High German name for a magpie, the “Agasse” of the French, or the “Gazza” of the Italians, all of which mean “the chatterer.” In Lincolnshire, the magpie is still called the “egg-lift,” a term which speaks for itself.

The nest of the magpie is, in every way, remarkable. So large is it, so out of proportion to the size of the bird, and, to all appearances

from below, so unfinished, that a legend has been invented to account for its incongruities and shortcomings—so clever a bird, so unsatisfactory a nest! When the world was still young, so runs the story, the magpie, though she was sharp enough—too sharp, perhaps, in other things—found herself, I suppose by way of compensation, quite unable to construct her own nest, and called in other birds to help her. “Place this stick thus,” said the blackbird. “Ah,” said the magpie, “I knew that afore.” Other birds followed with other suggestions, and to all of them she made the same reply. Their patience was, at last, exhausted by her conceit, and they left her in a body, saying with one consent, “Well, Mistress Mag, as you seem to know all about it, you may e’en finish the nest yourself”; and so, with its dome unfinished and unable to keep out wind and rain, it has, in consequence, remained to this very day.

No one who imagined or propagated this legend can ever have climbed to a magpie’s nest, still less faced the difficulty of getting round it or above it, on its lofty perch, of finding the small hole in its side, or of forcing his hand through it, often at the cost of much blood, and so reaching the grey-green eggs, freckled all over with brown,

from five to seven in number, deeply and securely housed within it. I have climbed, in my time, to some sixty magpies' nests at every stage of their construction and of the growth of their inmates, and I have never reached *terra firma* again, without marvelling at the high constructive art displayed in them. At the bottom, comes the layer of sticks so kindly suggested by the black-bird; then a layer, or some big lumps, of well-tempered mud and clay binding them together; and so on, sticks and mortar, mortar and sticks, in alternate strata, as though it were lath and plaster laid by an accomplished plasterer. Then succeed thinner twigs and pliant rootlets wound round the deep cup-like hollow, which can be reached only through a hole in the side, just large enough to admit the bird's body, and fenced round outside by a perfect *cheval-de-frise* of the sharpest thorns the bird can collect, chiefly black-thorn. The whole is surmounted by a dome of sticks, loosely yet securely interlacing, not intended to keep out the rain, which is quite unnecessary, but serving as a perfectly secure protection against any larger bird of prey which may wish to force its way in, whether to suck the eggs, or to take possession of a nest so much better built than any

which it can build itself. It would be a bold raven, or crow, or hawk who would attack the magpie through such a porthole in such a fortress.

It should be mentioned that there is another version of the legend which puts a quite different complexion on the case, and is much nearer to the facts. It is, I suspect, the later version of the two ; for the sound principle of "*difficilior lectio potior*"—that is, that where there are two readings of a passage, the more difficult is the original one, because difficulty leads to emendation, while clearness of statement obviates it—applies to legends as well as to readings. The birds, so runs the story, noticed that, whereas their nests were often robbed by foes, the magpie alone hatched out full broods. So they applied to her for instruction in nest architecture. "Certainly ;" said the magpie, "let me give you a lesson. I began by taking a stick and laying it thus." "Well! that is simple enough," said the learners. "Then I take another stick, and lay it thus." "Well!" interjected the class impatiently. "Then another stick I lay so." "But that is what we all do." "I then take a fourth stick," said the patient teacher—who I am afraid, forgot to mention the lumps of clay which tie the whole together—"I lay it upon the others, so." "But

there is nothing new in that," exclaimed the disciples; "we all know that much, and if you have nothing newer to tell us, we may as well be off." So the birds flew away in a huff, and to this day, they have never learnt to cover over their nests, because they had not the patience to let the magpie, who was ready to teach them, teach in her own way, by beginning at the beginning. Which things are they not, for both teachers and learners, an allegory?

Sometimes, the magpie's nest will last for years, and the bird return to it and rear her young therein, after doing any "spring cleaning" and patching up that may be needed. Generally, however, she prefers to build a new nest every year, leaving the old one to be occupied—should it so please them—in successive seasons, by less skilful nest-builders, such as the hobby hawk, the kestrel hawk, the horned owl, or, as I found on one occasion, much to my surprise and mortification, after an exceptionally long and difficult climb, in a belt of fir trees between Stafford and Knighton, by a presumptuous, every-day starling. A magpie's nest, once discovered, may thus, like the carrion crow's, prove a genuine treasure-trove for years to come. Such a master-builder is the bird, that she



CLYFFE CLUMP.
From a Drawing by Fanny Kindersley.



sometimes constructs a dummy nest or two, near to her proper one, not, I think, with any definite notion of occupying them; but rather, as does a squirrel or a jenny wren, either as something to fall back upon, a reserve, in case of need, or as likely to mislead a birds'-nester.

I am convinced, after fifty years of observation, that the magpie, if unmolested, will invariably return, either in her own person, or in that of her offspring, with true raven-like fidelity to the wood or clump of trees in which she first saw the light. There were not less than eight of such hereditary fastnesses or freeholds, within a radius of four miles from my old home at Stafford, in which, year after year, I could safely count on finding, and watching from first to last, a magpie's nest.

On occasion, the magpie has been known to outdo even the raven in his affection—I do not say for his mate—but for his home and for the offspring which, in germ, were housed within it. Towards the end of the earlier half of the last century, a pair of magpies built their nest within forty yards of a stable in Scotland. The owner tried—as gamekeepers, skilled in their murderous profession always do—to shoot the male bird first, sure of being able to get at the female, through

her best affections, at his leisure, afterwards. But as the male bird took good care of himself and kept well out of shot, he grew impatient and killed the mother-bird. What happened? The male magpie, within a day or two, sought and found a mate who was willing to take upon herself, at a moment's notice, the duties of both wife and mother, and she at once began to sit upon the alien eggs. She shared her predecessor's fate; and the male bird was actually able to induce a third, and even a fourth, helpmeet to perform the same irksome duties, and to run the same risks, with the same sad result. In another part of Scotland a still more extraordinary case occurred. The date, the place, and the names of the landowner and the gamekeeper concerned, are all given, in this case, as in the other, by Macgillivray.* The male bird managed to escape the gamekeeper, but no less than six successive female magpies were shot sitting, one after the other, on the same eggs.

The questions which occur to one, in connection with such a strange story, are legion; but questions, I fear, they must always remain. How could the male bird find a disengaged female at that time of year at all, and, still more, at so short a notice?

* *British Birds*, i. p. 570.

How did he make her understand what he wanted? What arguments did he use? Did this new Blue-beard "upon compulsion," feel any compunction of conscience in luring one bird after another to marriage, to motherhood, and to death? Were the birds related to him before, and, if so—the most likely explanation, I think, of all—did each member of this strange stock recognise the paramount and overmastering obligation of preserving the family at all hazards, an obligation which, as Maeterlinck tells us in his fascinating work *The Life of the Bee*, is fulfilled in the most self-forgetful—nay, self-annihilating—spirit by the bees? Perish the individual, perish any number of individuals, but let the stock survive. We know not; but again I would remark how inscrutable are the hearts and minds of animals; of birds above all other animals; and of the members, as it seems to me, of the great corvine family, above all other birds!

The magpie has been known, under special circumstances, to transfer her parental affections from her own young, which she had lost, to those of another bird. A brood of young ravens, which had been taken from their nest, were being brought up in a cart-shed by the carter's boy who had taken

them. The young of a magpie, who had happened to build her nest near the shed, were taken and destroyed by the same boy. The bereaved parents hearing "the young ravens which cry," and which, at that stage of their growth, seem never to be satisfied with food, consoled themselves, it is to be hoped, in some measure, for their own loss, by assiduously supplying the wants of the "ravenous" young birds, till they were removed from the shed by their owner.

On one occasion, an old magpie's nest gave shelter to a tenant more unlike to herself even than an owl or a starling. It had been noticed that an exceptionally fine fox, found in the same cover, time after time, gave the same splendid cross-country run, making the same points, reaching the same plantation, and, then, always disappearing at the same spot in it, beyond which neither eyesight nor scent could track him. One day, however, he forgot, for the first and last time, the length of his brush. His tail was espied hanging out of the hole in an old magpie's nest to which, when hard put to it, he had managed to climb, and in which he had now, once too often, claimed the right of sanctuary. Poor Reynard was "caught at last."

What, it may be asked, does the magpie do

with her long tail, longer even, in proportion, than Reynard's brush, when she is sitting for weeks continuously—except when her faithful husband takes turns with her—upon her eggs? She cannot carry it straight out behind her, for the cup of the nest is too narrow, neither can she thrust it through the opening, for that is too high for her to reach; moreover, she always prefers to sit with her face towards the doorway, ready to escape at a moment's notice. She probably keeps it turned straight up, as she does when she is stepping gingerly, in search of food, through high and wet grass, anxious lest one single feather in her lovely plumage should be soiled or out of place. When she is building or laying, it is difficult to find her at home, she slips off at the first alarm; but when once she has begun to sit, it is as difficult to get her out of the nest, as it was before to find her in it. "Her strength," and safety, she thinks, and rightly thinks, as does a squatting covey of partridge, "is to sit still." Repeated blows of a stout oak stick on the trunk below often fail to dislodge her. I have, many times, climbed halfway up the tree, and, on one occasion, have even touched the nest itself, before she went off. Is she more anxious about her own life, which, indeed, at this time of year, is "in

jeopardy every hour," or that of her young? A gamekeeper will sometimes fire one barrel of his gun right up through the nest, hoping to make short work of her; but, at that height, the nest, owing to its "armour-plating," its successive layers of sticks and plaster, often turns out to be shot-proof. Out dashes the bird, and dropping down perpendicularly ten feet or so, as if shot, flurries or misleads her foe, and then, putting rapidly the trunk of the tree between herself and him, often escapes the second barrel unhurt. Unfortunately, it is as easy to poison or trap a magpie as it is difficult to shoot her. Her dead body forms one of the commonest and most conspicuous trophies of the gamekeeper's ghastly gibbet; and so it comes about that whole estates in Dorset and in other counties, and many wild tracts of moorland and woodland which are admirably suited to her habits, and whose charms would be indefinitely enhanced by her presence, seldom catch a glimpse of her graceful movements or her exquisite plumage.

There is nothing in Nature quite like the magpie's chatter or clatter of short quick notes. Mr Hudson compares it to the sound of a wooden rattle or to the bleating of a goat, with a dash of the human voice—the guttural voice of the Negro—thrown in.

One of her English names, "magot," and one of her French names, "margot," fairly represent the sound; while two of her other colloquial names, "chatter-pie" and "nan-pie," express sufficiently the popular opinion as to her loquacity. Harsh and rasping the note no doubt is, but it is suggestive of much that is delightful in the country side. Strangely enough, it has often proved of use to her most deadly foe, the gamekeeper; for it is her habit, as it is also, sometimes, that of a jay, when she sees a skulking enemy, to chatter vehemently, to follow him about, and worry him till he has disappeared. Many a stoat, a dog, a cat, sometimes even a lurking poacher, has been discovered by the gamekeeper, guided by her easily recognised note of alarm. May not Shakespeare have had at least an inkling—it would be difficult to say of what observable fact in Nature he did not have some inkling—of this habit of the magpie when he says:

"Augurs, and understood relations have,
By magot-pyes and choughs and rooks brought forth
The secret'st man of blood?"

A flock of wood-pigeons, of peewits, of starlings, will rise in a body from a field, and make off when they hear the magpie's note of alarm, and so,

perhaps, escape some youthful sportsman who may be creeping down the hedge to have a sly shot at them. The sight of a fox—perhaps because the magpie recognises in him her worst rival in point of astuteness—seems to throw her quite off her balance, and makes her more than ever voluble. She has sometimes been observed, with great want of magnanimity, not unshared however by other “higher” animals, to make repeated dashes at a beaten fox, when he is labouring over his last fallow; and, more than this, she has sometimes, by her scolding, guided the huntsman and the hounds when they were at fault, to the spot where, exhausted, but still intrepid, he is lying down and awaiting his final agony, his mind made up “to fight in silence and in silence die.”

Are there two kinds of magpies, as some naturalists and many gamekeepers assert, in England: the “tree-magpie” who builds her nest high in trees, and the “bush-magpie” who builds hers low in bushes, in apple trees, or even in a high hedge? It is admitted that, in form and colouring, in the shape of the nest and the look of the eggs, they are indistinguishable; and it is surely impossible to maintain that a mere difference in the position of a nest, a very variable

factor in the life-history of a bird, constitutes any specific distinction. The jay, for instance, generally builds her nest in a bush ; but I have found it, more than once, at the top of a fir tree, thirty or forty feet from the ground. Where game is much preserved and the magpie much persecuted, she builds—if indeed she builds or exists at all—close to the top of the thickest fir tree, where the nest, huge though it is, is often hardly to be distinguished from the surrounding branches. In more favoured districts, where the balance of Nature is not so much disturbed, and where guns are scarce, as, for instance, in one part, at least, of Dorsetshire, in many parts of Somersetshire, and in the broad tract of pasture which, as in the Harrow district, surrounds the ever-advancing London, and separates it from the preserves beyond, it is a fairly common bird, and makes its nest, without the slightest attempt at concealment, in a hedge-row elm, beginning to construct it in March, many weeks before it can be, in any degree, screened by the foliage.

Within the last few years, this beautiful and usually shy bird has followed the example of the wood-pigeons which add so much to the interest of the London parks, and venturing over the leagues of intervening houses, has domiciled itself safely in

St James's Park. As many as five have been seen on one tree. The park-keepers say they do not breed there ; but it may be hoped that, before long, their fortress-nest will be a familiar sight even to Londoners.

In Norway, the magpie sometimes builds her nest, like the house-martin, beneath the broad overhanging eaves of the houses ; and in one instance, recorded by Bishop Stanley, she actually built her nest in a gooseberry bush on the ground, nest and bush inextricably interwoven together—a fortress within a fortress ; for round the whole, and at a little distance from it, she erected a palisade of thorns, a zareba in fact, probably intended to keep children and dogs and cats at a respectful distance.

An interesting survival of what, I believe, to have been once a universal habit among magpies, and to have died away, chiefly owing to the diminution in their numbers, may still be observed, here and there, in England. It is well known that rooks and starlings congregate in vast numbers, for roosting purposes, in favoured spots, when the breeding season is over ; each separate flock in the huge parliament always retaining its identity, and returning, day after day, to its usual resorts. Magpies, from the nature of the case, were never

very numerous anywhere, and, of course, they are nowhere numerous now. But I have heard of certain woods, in parts of the country where Nature is allowed pretty well to have her way, and I know of one such myself, which, for obvious reasons, shall be nameless, a small fir plantation on high ground in Somersetshire, to which if you go, towards dusk, any evening between June and February, you will see family after family of magpies drifting in from great distances, till there are, perhaps, eighty or a hundred individuals, and the whole plantation seems alive with their curracking. When morning comes, the convocation is dissolved, and they go off in their families, as the rooks and starlings do in their flocks, each to their happy hunting-grounds, a remarkable combination in birds of tribal and of family life.

In one part of Dorsetshire, which shall also be nameless, the magpie is, to this day, a general favourite except with the gamekeeper. So numerous are they in that region, that in one plantation which forms their nightly resort from all the surrounding country, a gamekeeper told Mr Hudson, in his wanderings, that, with a friend to help him, he had killed thirty in a single evening, as they came down to roost.

On the wide expanse of Puddletown or "Egdon" Heath, which I described, in a previous article, as

being one of the last refuges of the raven in Dorset, there are a large number of deep circular pits, dispersed at intervals over its surface, without an angle in the whole, and tapering down to a comparatively narrow point. They are not the work of human hands ; but geologists are not yet agreed as to their exact cause. One of them, Culpepper's Bowl, is large enough to conceal an ambuscade of a thousand men, and deep enough to hide from view the well-grown oaks or mountain-ashes which grow within it. Some of these pits lie concealed "under the green-wood tree" ; all of them are "far from the madding crowd" ; and are still, in their little way, sanctuaries of wild life. The shelving banks of sand and peat are clothed, in summer, with bracken which often out-tops the head, and are honeycombed with rabbit burrows. At the bottom of one of the pits, a fox may often be found taking his siesta, after his night-long wanderings, safe from the "view-halloo," and with his favourite prey close by and ready for his mouth ; while, at the bottom of a neighbouring pit, I have often disturbed a roe-deer, a truant from Yellowham Wood, where, as in most of the larger covers in Dorset, they are to be found in numbers ;—for Dorset, alone of English counties, can boast of the

exquisitely graceful roe-deer as a familiar and a permanent inhabitant. In one of the gnarled or stunted hawthorn bushes, which grow within the pit, safe from every wind that blows, and heavily laden, sometimes by the over-mastering ivy, sometimes by the luxuriant honeysuckle, which lavishes its sweetness on the air around, the "bush-magpie" often makes her nest, scarcely to be distinguished amidst the leafy tangle. Here, and perhaps only here, as far as my experience goes, you can stand on *terra firma*, and look *down* upon the dome of the magpie's nest immediately below you ; you can all but see into it.

The surroundings of these pits are in perfect harmony with the pits themselves. Lie down half buried in the heather, or amidst the dwarf gorse—which, in autumn, is festooned with streamers of the delicately tinted dodder—and you will see, after an interval, the other magpie flitting in slow flight, and curracking merrily as he flies, from pit to pit, or from bush to bush, or perched upon the top of a holly, his tail fully spread, and swaying gracefully up and down, as it fans or is fanned by the passing breeze. In the hollow of the moor below, you may watch a circle of herons, perhaps twenty in number, gathered together from the rich valley of the Frome

which lies beyond, and has given them a good night's fishing, waiting patiently for the approach of evening, and with Duddle plantation, in which so many of them have been, and, I hope, so many more of them will be, safely reared, full in their sight. You may see the mallard wheeling in narrower and ever narrower, and lower and ever lower circles, as he nears the bed of heather, in which his mate is sitting on her eggs ; and, best of all, if you are very lucky, once perhaps in a month, you may hear, far overhead, the sepulchral croak of a pair of ravens who are on a passing visit from the sea-cliffs to Millicent Clump, or Raven Tarn, where they, and, perhaps, the long line of their ancestors, have been born and bred.

“ Among the Romans not a bird
Without a prophecy was heard ;
Fortunes of empires often hung
On the magician magpie's tongue.”

And no sketch of the magpie would be complete if it failed to say something of the folk-lore, of the legends, the superstitions, and the attributes, self-contradictory though they often are, which have attached themselves to the bird, at different times and in different countries. Her geographical range

is not much inferior to that of the raven, stretching, as it does from the Western United States, over the whole of Europe, and over two-thirds of Asia, right away to Formosa or Hainan. The poet therefore was geographically accurate when he said, "the magpie scatters notes of presage *wide*." It would never do for the magpie, pert, prying, pushing, inquisitive, acquisitive bird that she is, to be behind anybody else in anything; and if the history of the raven begins with Noah, hers must do so also. She was the only bird—so runs the legend—who refused to enter the ark when Noah bade her, but preferred to stay gossiping on its roof about the drowning world. The patriarch rebuked her for her contumacy, her self-will, her evil example; and, ever since then, she has been what she is, a bird of mystery, of suspicion, of omen—of what kind of omen in any particular case, it is safer not to say till you see what comes after it.

In one of the hymns of the Rig Veda, the earliest of the Hindu scriptures, the magpie is a bird, now of good, now of evil influence. On the one hand, she is the harbinger of consumption and disease; on the other, when a witch has deprived two young princes, in their sleep, of speech and life, it is two magpies who are sent, like the two ravens, the

messengers of Odin, to procure the "water of speech" and "the water of life," and so undo the evil work. In Classical mythology, she is the sacred bird of Bacchus, and in her loquacity rivals that of the worshippers of the god, whose tongues have been unloosed by wine. So unlimited is her self-conceit that she challenges the nightingale—nay, the nine Muses themselves—to compete with her in song; and when the gossiping Pierides, the nine daughters of Pierus and Evippe, follow her example, they are, as a fitting punishment, so Ovid tells us, changed by the Muses into her shape, and become as many magpies.

"And still their tongues ran on, though changed to birds,
In endless clack, and vast desire of words."

In German folk-lore, the magpie is a bird of the infernal regions, now changing herself into a witch, now acting the part of the traditional broomstick, and carrying a witch through the air, upon her back. But she is never represented as wholly bad; she is white as well as black, a "motley" in fact: a beneficent as well as a malignant influence, and she gives warning by her chatter—and here the folk-lore is based on facts, as we have already seen—of the prowling of the wolf, or of the unexpected

advent of a guest. "When the pie chatters," says an old proverb, "we shall have guests." In Italy, she is proverbial for her tittle-tattle. Hence her name *gazza*, or chatterer, from which again comes the word *gazzetta*, or "gazette," for a newspaper which, like the bird, reveals secrets. In a large part of France, where people go out, in sporting dress, to kill the thrush, the robin, and the skylark, and welcome the swallows, upon their return, in springtime, to their shores, by wholesale massacre on electric wires set up for the purpose, the magpie is almost the only bird, large or small, which does not seem to wear a hunted look. Her nest, which manages to cling somehow to the lopped and scarecrow poplars, which the inhabitants fancy to be trees, is, in the eyes of the lover of birds, one of the few alleviations of a railway journey through large tracts of a country, which, if God made it beautiful, *la belle France*, man has done his best to make unattractive or even hideous, by depriving it of its hedges, its bushes, its woods, and its birds. In Poitou, it is said that a trace of "pye-worship" still survives. A bunch of laurel and heather is hung on the top of a high tree "in honour of the pye," because there, too, her chatter used to warn the people of the wolf's approach. "*Portez,*"

so runs the saying, "*la crêpe* [pancake] *à la pie*."*

Throughout Scandinavia, as I have shown, the magpie is a universal favourite, a bird of good omen, and all but a member of the family. A sheaf of corn is tied to the top of every house or outhouses at Christmas, that she may share in the festivities of the season. A story told in the *Standard* of the 26th of January 1877, and quoted by Mr Thiselton-Dyer, shows, better perhaps than anything else, the queer insight and the quaint revenge which popular belief attributes to this eerie bird. A lady, then still living near Carlstadt, in Sweden, had insulted a Finn woman, who had entered the court of her house to ask for food, by telling her to take the magpie, which was hanging in a cage, and "eat that." The Finn, after casting an evil eye at the lady, who had managed to throw scorn at once upon her own well-known magical powers and those of the "magician" bird, took it away with her and disappeared. The incident seemed closed. The lady had all but forgotten what had happened.

* Cf. *Ornithological Mythology*, by Angelo de Gubernatis, ii. 254 sq. Grimm's *Teutonic Mythology*, ii. 675. Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, iii. 215. Thiselton-Dyer's *English Folk-Lore*, p. 81 sq.

Not so the Finn and the magpie. One day, the lady noticed that, when she went out, a magpie placed itself right in her path. The same thing happened day after day, and the first magpie was soon joined by others. Misgivings arose in her mind, and she tried, by various devices, to frighten them away. The more they multiplied, the more she tried to get rid of them; and the more she tried to get rid of them, the more they multiplied and grew. Wherever she went, she was attended by these strange and importunate retainers. They perched upon her shoulders, they tugged at her dress, they pecked at her ankles. In sheer desperation, she shut herself up in the house, but they waited outside, and when the door was opened, in they hopped. At last, she took to her bed in a room with closed shutters, and, even then, the magpies kept tapping, tapping outside. How the story ended we are not told; probably by a premature death, and a funeral attended in force by the triumphant magpies. In any case, the magpie must have been safe from insult and from injury, in that district at least, for a long time to come.

But it is the popular belief in England, or rather the British Isles, which interests us most, and which throws most light on the habits of the bird. There

are few children who have not heard the lines which run, albeit with many variations :

“One for sorrow,
Two for mirth,
Three for a wedding,
Four for a birth,
Five for Heaven,
Six for Hell,
Seven for the de’il’s own sell.”

A bad look-out, you may say ; but some of the variations of the later lines, as for instance :

“Five for a fiddle,
Six for a dance,
Seven for England,
Eight for France,”

put a different complexion on the matter, and make the bird to be, on the whole, one of good rather than of bad omen. All versions however agree that if you see a single magpie, you must look out for storms. Wordsworth himself, a close observer and a great admirer of the bird, who sings how “the magpie chatters with delight,” and again, how “the jay makes answer, while the magpie chatters,” would have been sorry on his “Excursion” to meet with a solitary specimen of the magpie.

“I would readily rejoice
If *two* auspicious magpies crossed my way.”

Happily, a magpie is seldom to be seen by himself, and that, for the most creditable of all reasons, his fondness for his family. Magpies, like ravens and owls, pair for life, and they are as fond of their young as they are of one another, keeping them together for several months, sometimes even till the next breeding season calls them to new scenes and duties new. The parent birds are never, except by the merest accident, out of sight of each other. If you wait a minute or two, therefore, it is generally easy to turn your sorrow into mirth; and, if not, you can at least do something to avert or mitigate the evil consequences. If you are a Dorsetshire peasant, you will respectfully raise your hat; if Devonshire, you will spit over your right shoulder three times, and mutter a mystic distich; if a Yorkshireman, you will reverentially make the sign of the cross upon your breast, or cross your thumbs; while elsewhere, you will turn three times round, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Scotch ideas on the subject can hardly be better expressed than in the broad Scotch of the famous "Shepherd" in the *Noctes Ambrosianæ* of Christopher North. "I've seen an expression in the een o' a pyet wi' its head turned to ae side, and though in general a shy bird, no caring for you, though you

present your wang (walking stick) at it, as if you were going to shoot it wi' a gun, that has made my verra heart-strings crinkle up wi' the thochts o' some indefinite evil comin', I kent no frae what quarter o' the lowerin' heaven. For pyets, at certain times and places, are no canny, and their nebs look as if they were peckin' at mort-clothes."

There is, I have reason to believe, in spite of the great sociability of the bird, such a thing or such a portent as a permanently solitary magpie, a "solitary" by choice or by conviction. One such is often to be seen in a valley, not a mile from Bingham's Melcombe, the place where I am now writing; nor have I ever seen him so frequently as I have since I began this essay. Does he know what I am doing, and has he any remarks to make about it? How one wishes, if he had, that one had ears to hear! But, whatever be the cause of his solitary life—age, disease, disappointment, despondency, bereavement, moroseness—I feel little doubt that the hermit-disposition which comes, once and again, upon men who have seen and shared too much in the follies of the world; which comes upon almost all animals, when they feel the approach of death, does, sometimes, creep over even this most sociable of birds. With the hermit's life, this particular

magpie seems to have adopted something also of the hermit's mind and manner. He is less excitable, less upon the move. You do not see him hopping in long bounds over the down. You do not hear his cheerful "currack" or "margot." He has no one to call to, no one to "do for" him. He has, apparently, no relations, no friends. He must have taken a vow of silence as well as of celibacy. Like the "Bachelor," in the poem of the grand old Dorset poet, William Barnes, you may see him

"Slinken on ! blinken on ! thinken on !

Gloomy and glum,

Nothen but dullness to come."

The populous solitude of Hyde Park is the last place which you would expect a hermit to select for his hermitage. Yet so it is. A solitary magpie is generally to be seen there or in the adjoining Kensington Gardens. He is a disreputable-looking old fellow enough, probably, owing to the London smoke. A careful observer, Mr Frank Ridley, tells me that he has watched him for many years and has never seen him consort with another magpie, though he occasionally keeps company with an equally disreputable-looking, solitary, carrion crow which haunts the park.

In the very same valley, at Bingham's Melcombe in which lives the magpie I have described above, and often not far from that "solitary," is another illustration of my point, a solitary heron. It may be objected that the heron is, by nature, except at the breeding season, as solitary, as a magpie is, by nature, sociable; and so, in some little measure, it is. But a heron is almost always within eye-shot or ear-shot of his fellows. If in wild-fowl shooting, you disturb a heron from the ditch in a water-meadow where he has speared a water vole, an eel, or a troutling, he rises generally with a loud cry of alarm, which will be heard by his fellow who is fishing or dozing, in a similar ditch, a quarter of a mile away. You will hear an answering cry; and, within a few moments, you will see not one, but a pair or more of herons, flapping slowly and majestically through mid-air. But no one has ever seen this particular heron with or near a mate. No other heron is to be found, even as a casual visitor, within three or four miles of him. He has, apparently, no kith no kin—I wish I could add that he has no enemies, but he has escaped them hitherto. The brook, the Devilish or Dewlish, which flows through the bottom of the manor house garden and by which he generally takes his stand, is a meagre one, very scantily



THE HERON.

From a Photograph by Mr Bushby.

[To face p. 320.]



supplied with fish, but there he is, year in, year out. He must be as content with a hermit's fare as he is with a hermit's life.

A third illustration I can give, as also within my own knowledge. It is that of a bird which you would least of all expect to submit to anything of the kind, the easy-going, pleasure-loving, daintily-stepping, heavily-feeding, arch-polygamist, the cock pheasant. Like a prematurely worn-out king or baron in the Middle Ages, this particular bird, a few years ago, took it into his head to retire from the world—from his world, the jealousies, we will suppose, the rivalries, the tittle-tattle of the inmates of his harem—and took up his abode in a remote wood, where you might as well expect to find a hen pheasant, as you might to find a woman, a cow, a mare, a sow, or any animal of the female sex, among the monasteries and monks of Mount Athos. His solitude lasted only for a year. He fell to the gun, among the rabbits who were, to all appearance, his only companions. I am bound to say that there were no signs of self-mortification about him. He was fat and well-liking and in full beauty of plumage ; and, if he died, in any sense, in the odour of sanctity, it was in that of Friar Tuck, rather than of St Anthony or St Benedict.

One other instance I can adduce, and that, as it seems to me, the most curious of them all. A male sparrow-hawk has, for thirty years past, been observed, almost night by night, to come to roost on the sill of a blocked up window in the house of my friend, Mr Edward Woodhouse, in the adjoining village of Ansty. He comes in shortly before dusk in the evening, and leaves as soon as it gets light in the morning. He has never been known to linger there by day, nor has he ever, for all these years, been seen with a mate. He has been carefully protected by his kind host while roosting. He is a lodger who will never be evicted, and yet has never paid for his lodgings, except by an occasional swoop, true to his name, on one of the all too numerous house sparrows which haunt the spot. What led him first to adopt a solitary life; how he came to select so strange a place for his nightly retreat; how he has managed to escape the many dangers that beset him on an estate which is so strictly "preserved"; above all, how he has managed to prolong his life so far beyond the term usually assigned to birds—these are questions which it is easier to ask than to answer. Can it be that he has lived so long, chiefly because he is a celibate, because, relieved, as he is, from the cares of a wife and a family, annually renewed, he has been

able to "take things easily"; and does he, on leaving his roost each morning, fly up at once, high in air, till he has got beyond the reach of the foes who would take his blood, and then, after living, at free quarters, in a district where experience has taught him that there are no such foes, does he return, with similar precautions, still high in air, and drop straight down on his sanctuary at nightfall? In any case, to have escaped, for so long a time, the eighteen gamekeepers of the Milton Abbey estate, he must have had the proverbial nine, nay, twice the nine lives of the cat.

I throw out these observations on what I believe to be "hermit birds" for what they may be worth, hoping that some one may be able to illustrate them further.

Sir Humphry Davy, in his *Salmonia*, remarks upon the curious connection, which he thought he had observed, between the appearance of a single magpie and a bad day's sport in fishing. "For anglers, in spring, it is always unlucky to see single magpies — but two may be always regarded as a favourable omen—and the reason is that, in cold and stormy weather, one magpie alone leaves the nest in search of food, the other remaining sitting upon the eggs, or the young

ones ; but when two go out together, the weather is warm, and mild, and, thus, favourable for fishing."

The history of the magpie in Ireland is highly characteristic of the country and its inhabitants, and has been accurately traced by Yarrell. She has been almost as conspicuous there by her absence, as by her presence. As long ago as 1360, her absence from Ireland was noted and thought noteworthy. Was she banished, I wonder, by St Patrick, along with the snakes and the frogs? Two centuries later (1578), Derrick while, in his *Image of Ireland*, he congratulated the country on her continued absence, deplored the presence of her counterpart, a worse miscreant still.

"No pyes to plucke the thatch from house
Are breed in Irish groundes ;
But worse than pyes, the same to burne,
A thousande maie be founde."

A century later again, no less a person than Swift thought it worth his while to tell his "Stella" that magpies were, contrary to the general opinion, indigenous to Wexford, and that they were spreading thence over the country. One tradition said that they were carried over to Ireland from England by a storm. Another, and, needless to

say, a much more popular one, was that they were imported by the English out of spite.* They are very common in Ireland now; and it seems that, by a curious coincidence, they re-entered the country about the same time as the re-appearance of the frogs there, St Patrick's curse, I suppose, having been suspended. One wonders why Irish humour has not yet caused the presence of a bird which is commonly represented as so mischievous, to figure in the House of Commons, among the many "wrongs of Ireland." When the final bill is presented of the sum due, in the imagination of Irish Patriots, from England to Ireland, we may yet see an item in the "great account" headed, *à la* Kruger, "to moral and material damage wrought by the magpie," so many pounds, so many shillings, and so many odd pence!

It is a pity that so few of the poets, usually the best interpreters of Nature and full of sympathy with her in her many moods, have found a word to say on the beauty of the magpie, on the grace of her movements, on her many attractive, or even estimable qualities. They seem only to have noticed her more superficial and less admirable

* See Yarrell's *British Birds*, 2nd edition, "The Magpie," vol. ii., p. 113.

characteristics, especially those which have been developed by her association with man. The two chief exceptions are Wordsworth, who is pre-eminently the poet of nature, the "most joy-bringing," as he has been called, "of English poets"; and old Chaucer, equally eminent, perhaps, as the poet of human nature, at least in its social aspects. The "joly pie" he often calls her. "Dinsome," "harsh," "a feathered thief," "a scandal-monger," are only a few of the epithets bestowed upon her by other poets.

"An impudent, presuming pye,
Malicious, ignorant and sly,"

says one of the number, piling his scorn high upon her ;

"Brazen magpies, fond of clack,
Full of insolence and pride,
Chattering, on the donkey's back
Perched, and pulled her shaggy hide,"

says another. But it should be noticed in justification, not so much of the epithets, as of the charge brought against the magpie in the last two lines, that Lord Lilford did once himself see a whole brood of magpies pecking an unfortunate donkey who had a sore back. Pope is the

most severe of all—but he was thinking, it is said, mainly of the human magpie, in whom he discovered some resemblance to the bird.

“So have I seen in black and white
A prating thing, a magpie hight,
Majestically stalk;
A stately worthless animal,
That plies the tongue and wags the tail,
All flutter, pride, and talk.”

James Montgomery represents a superficial onlooker as taunting the tame and educated magpie by saying to him :

“Magpie, thou, too, has learnt by rote to speak
Words without meaning, through thy uncouth beak.”

But he allows the magpie, with nearly equal justice, to retort upon his taunter :

“Words have I learnt, and without meaning too;
Mark well—my masters taught me all they knew.”

A few words only upon the magpie as a pet ; for so much that I have said upon the raven, in that capacity, applies to her. She has the same sort of sociability, the same secretiveness, the same thirst for education—of a certain kind—the same inherent and ineradicable love of mischief. Not that, in intellect and strength of character, she is,

in any way, equal to the raven. Fun she has in abundance, but hardly humour. Conscious humour, that high and rare gift of man, which interpenetrates and colours everything in life, is, I think, possessed, in germ, by the raven, and the raven alone. You see it in his eye, in the pose of his head, in his walk, in every movement of his body. The eye of the magpie is, like the wit of Dickens, always on the move, nervous, excitable, glittering, scintillating. The eye of the raven is like the humour of Goldsmith; it has a far-away look, it dreams, it thinks, "it bodes and it bodes," it all but smiles. The magpie will pick up many words or even sentences; and the old superstition that she will only talk, or talk well, if her tongue is slit with a thin and sharp silver sixpence, died a natural death about the time that the coins of the realm had to be "milled," and thus were rendered unsuitable for so stupidly cruel an operation.

Pliny knew more of the aptitudes and capabilities of a pet magpie than did our forefathers. The magpie, he says, is less famed for his talking powers than the parrot, only because he is more easily obtained and is at our doors. He talks more, and more clearly, than does the parrot. He is vehemently in love (*adamat*) with the words he has

picked up. He not only learns but takes pleasure in learning and practises with the utmost assiduity, till practice makes him perfect. It is well known that a magpie who cannot master a difficult word, will sometimes die of grief. A word which has not been often repeated to him is apt to slip his memory, and if while trying to recover it, he happens to hear it again, he is overjoyed. If he is not remarkable for his beauty, neither is there aught that is common looking about him. He has enough to be proud of in his power of imitating human speech. Pliny then goes on to remark, with not a little truth, that it is only those birds which feed on acorns that are clever talkers, and that the time to learn, if they are to learn at all, is limited to the first two years. The jay, *garrulus glandarius*, whom the poets call, now "painted," now "saucy," now "prating," now "scorning," is an apt illustration of his remarks.

Never keep a magpie in a cage; it will cramp every energy of her body and of her mind. Her tail, which is her greatest ornament, will be ruined, and a magpie without her tail is only a ghastly parody of herself. Keep her out of the house, by all means, for she has a well-developed taste for silver spoons and sixpences; and if, she ever happens to find a dressing-case open, she will ransack its

contents, select the most sparkling or most valuable, and hide them in so very safe a place that, if she does ever find them herself again, there is little chance of her owner being able to do so. But give her the run of the stable-yard, of a field, of a garden, and all her faculties will be developed to the utmost. She will alternately pet and plague all the four-footed or feathered inhabitants of the homestead. She will have private hiding-places everywhere, and will "plant" the garden with every conceivable object, animal, vegetable, or mineral. If they, all of them, would only grow, what a varied crop there would be! The gardener will have some compensation for his losses in the strange objects, the ever fresh treasure-trove, which he will always be turning up; and you, if you do allow yourself to be too much irritated by the occasional loss of a knife, of a ball of string, of a garden label, of a pair of garden scissors, will, at least, have the consolation of seeing others irritated by like losses, thanks to the same incorrigible rascal. "There is something not altogether displeasing to us in the misfortunes of our friends." You may try to break the magpie of his thieving habit, but you will never succeed. The more he puts you out, the more he enjoys it. He will watch, with his head on one side, every

operation which is going on, and will have something to say to it when he is least watched and least wanted.

I will conclude with an anecdote, illustrative of the magpie's love of mischief and of sport. There was a field wherein clothes were often hung out to dry on posts, which were let down into deep wooden sockets buried in the ground, and were carried away, and put under cover, when they were not in use. A gravel path led round the field, and a tame magpie, which had the run of it, was observed to walk repeatedly and demurely from the path to a particular point in the field, conveying each time a stone in her bill, and then returning without it. A magpie seldom continues at any one amusement for any length of time; but this amusement went on so long that the curiosity of the owner was aroused. There must be something unusually novel or piquant about it. He went to the spot and found that a large toad had fallen into one of the wooden sockets, and that the magpie was amusing herself by deliberately stoning it! As each shot told, the toad gave a little hop of distress in the hole deep below, which the magpie capped by a big hop of satisfaction, and an irresistible currack of delight above.

Pity, is it, nay a thousand pities, that this Merry

Andrew of the woods, this pretty, restless, Flibbertigibbet, this “magician” magpie, with her marked character and her varied associations, the favourite of the whole of the Scandinavian races, tolerated or encouraged even by the bird-exterminating French, should, in obedience to the insatiable demands of the annual battue, be banished from so many large and picturesque tracts of “merrye” England, that she should wear a hunted look, and should owe her bare existence, not to the love of beauty and of nature—one of God’s best and highest gifts to man—but only to her own sagacity and her suspiciousness, not without good reason, of those who were once, who ought to be still, and who, one would fain hope, may, one day, again be, her best friends.

CHAPTER IX

THE OLD MANOR HOUSE AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

THE old Manor House at Bingham's Melcombe, which is the home of my later, as the old thatched Rectory at Stafford was of my earlier years, is probably, the oldest house of the kind in Dorset. Dorset is a county which is rich in immemorial or mysterious records of the past, like the Cerne Giant, or in huge earth works, British, Saxon, or Roman, like Maiden Castle, or Rawlesbury, or Badbury Rings. It is rich in mediæval abbeys, some of them mere fragments, though exquisite fragments, like Cerne or Bindon, others, still in full use and beauty, like Wimborne or Sherborne or Milton. It is rich in mediæval castles, like Woodsford of Stephen's time, like Sherborne again, or like Corfe, so unique in its situation and its surroundings. But it is rich, above all, in the number and the

quality of its old manor houses. Many, or indeed most of these, have, in the lapse of years, fallen into woful disrepair, or have been turned into farm-houses, disfigured by the cheap and ugly out-buildings, roofed with slate or corrugated iron, which have sprung up around them in an age which, if it was in a hurry to be rich, had little eye or soul for beauty. But such is not the case with Cranborne Manor House, for instance, with Wolfeton, with Warmwell, with Bloxworth, with Athelhampton, and perhaps half a dozen others; nor, what concerns this chapter more, is it the case with Bingham's Melcombe.

For more than six centuries, Bingham's Melcombe has belonged to one family, the Binghams, who, with few intermissions, have continuously resided in it. It has, indeed, received additions from time to time, but each has been in fair keeping with what went before it and with the whole. Its first beginnings go back, it is believed, to the reign of the first and noblest of the Edwards, and what it had grown to be by the time of King Edward VI., that it is, substantially, in the time of his remote descendant, King Edward VII. Everything about it is old-world. The peace of centuries seems to be brooding over it. They have passed over it, with their

myriad changes and chances, with their ceaseless ebb and flow, with the racket and the turmoil of all their half-realised hopes and fears, leaving it unchanged—one would almost say, unchangeable. Thus, like the most venerable of our colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, it seems to typify not the leaps and bounds, not the feverish progress, but—what is more attractive, and at least equally valuable—the quiet continuity of English country life and of English history. It is eleven miles, as the saying is, from “anywhere”—eleven miles, that is, from the bustle of any market town, Dorchester, or Blandford, or Sturminster Newton, and from the intermittent rush of any railway station. Few places in England, at the present day, can say as little—or as much—for themselves as that. The shriek of the locomotive never has been, never probably will be, heard in its sleepy hollow.

Let me endeavour, in this chapter, first, to describe, in outline, the Manor House itself and its surroundings; and then to say something of its wild animals, and of the character, the mode of life, the traditions, and the beliefs of the manly and simple-minded people who inhabit the neighbourhood. Its birds I reserve for a separate and concluding chapter.

The house stands at the end of a long and narrow valley, on a bed of what geologists, I believe, call "green sand." Voltaire remarked that his only objection to the name "Holy Roman Empire," applied as it was in his day, and as it had been, for centuries, to the possessions of the House of Hapsburg, was that it was neither "Holy" nor "Roman," nor an "Empire"; and, certainly, to the ordinary eye, the bed of green sand on which Bingham's Melcombe is said to stand, appears to be neither green nor sand. It is surrounded by steep chalk hills which part, here and there, into deep "coombs," and are often crowned by plantations of beech—the tree which is most at home in the chalk—of larch, or of spruce fir. The soft, sweet, springy turf of the downs yields to innumerable rabbits the food which they most love, and which can perhaps be best spared to them by man. It is richly carpeted, in spring, with cowslips, whilst, in summer and autumn, amidst a sprinkling of the rarer orchises, the bee, the fly, and the green-man, it is spangled by myriads of minute flowers—and, as a rule, the smaller the size of a flower, the more exquisite is its loveliness—beds of the deep-blue polygala and the light-blue scabious, broad patches of yellow crowsfoot and dwarf golden rod,

potentillas and tormentillas and harebells, and little eye-brights and shepherds' weather-glasses everywhere.

The hills culminate, three miles away, in Bulbarrow, 903 feet high above the sea, the chief height in Dorset, and within a hundred feet of that to which the chalk formation, Inkpen Beacon, for instance, seems able to aspire. The view from it is one of the finest in the south of England. It embraces nearly the whole of Dorset, and considerable stretches of Somerset and Wiltshire as well, extending from Dunkerry Beacon, the Quantocks, and the Mendips in one direction, to the Isle of Portland and the Isle of Wight in the other. Immediately below, spread out as in a map, lies the rich and beautiful vale of Blackmoor, so well known for its fences and its foxes ; and, prominent on the near or distant horizons, are spots fraught with interest of the most varied kind ; Badbury Rings, connected, by its history, with Arthur, the most famous of British, as is Alfred's Tower in another direction with Alfred, the noblest of our English, kings ; Hardy's monument, erected, not, as some even of the more intelligent inhabitants, deliciously oblivious of time and place, imagine, in honour of the Dorset novelist of to-day, but of Hardy of the

Victory and of Nelson's last embrace; Shaftesbury, perched on its hill-top, with its many churches and the remains of its ancient abbey just revealed to view; the park and woods of Sherborne Castle; Woodbury Hill, the scene, in bygone times, of famous fairs and county gatherings; Poole Harbour, and Branksea Island with its heronry, Castle Hill, Dun Cliff, Whin Green, Culliford Tree, Charborough Tower, Creech Barrow. The eye ranges from Pentridge, the birthplace of the Dorset poet, William Barnes, to Bockhampton Hang, the birthplace of the Dorset novelist, Thomas Hardy, and embraces, within its ample sweep, almost every spot which has been rendered classic by the true and tender poetry of the one, or by the brilliant novels of the other.

The gateway at the end of the avenue of stately elms which leads to the Manor House, is guarded by two stone eagles, the Bingham crest, represented not, as usual, in repose, but bolt upright, with their huge wings spread backwards and upwards, as if in the act to flap or fly. Michael Angelo pronounced the noblest panegyric on the splendid bronze horse of Marcus Aurelius, which stands on the slopes of the Capitol at Rome, with foreleg uplifted and curved, always dropping but never dropped, when he



THE CATHOUSE BINGHAM'S MET COMBE



addressed it in the simple imperative, "*Cammina*," "walk"; and the villagers of Bingham's Melcombe must have half expected to see the eagles take their long meditated flight, when, with unconscious poetry, they first called them, not by their own name, but by that of their most prominent and suggestive feature, "the Wings." "When I passed," they may still sometimes be heard to say, "by the wings this morning."

In front of the main building, and hiding it so much from view that, on a first approach, it is often taken for the house itself, is the "Gate House," probably the oldest part of the whole. With its comparative want of architectural features, its strongly barred folding doors, its solid walls, in one place nine feet thick, its massive supporting buttresses, it must have been intended, in those troublous times, as a protection for the more artistic dwelling-house which was to rise behind it. Once inside the court to which the gate house leads, you seem to have passed, at a step, into an older world, into the middle of the Middle Ages. A sense of ineffable repose steals over you. You lose all account of time. Two small sundials, indeed, placed one above the other, faintly assert the existence of movement somewhere, but it is not movement there ;

and one even of these, placed in a spot where hardly a ray of the sun can reach it, seems to utter a silent protest against note being taken of any such disturbing influence. It protests, in fact, against its own existence. The "swallow" pigeons which sit drowsily on the roof ridges, or on the coigns of vantage afforded to them by the stone work, forget or forego their usual animation ; they preen themselves in silence, and rarely rouse themselves into a flight beyond the sleepy precincts. They too have caught the atmosphere of the place. The house rambles round three sides of the court with sweet meandering irregularity. There is hardly one straight line, one right angle, or one dead level in the whole. It was reserved for modern times to make the discovery that in the Parthenon there was not a single straight line ; and who can say how much of its ideal beauty is due to the secret it has so long and so jealously guarded ?

The court is on two levels, the higher reached by two short flights of weather-beaten stone steps opposite to each other and meeting on a common landing, which, by their colouring, their shape, and their surroundings, recall the storied flight of steps at Haddon Hall. The retaining wall is built of the small grey bricks of the olden time, which, in their

interstices, give birth and sustenance to a wealth of flowers and ferns which almost hide it from view ; the tiny linaria or toad-flax, with its long festoons, the purple aubrietia, the ceterach, the wall-rue, the Scotch maiden-hair. Along the terrace, above the steps and the wall, are large bushes of hydrangea, which are sheltered from every wind that blows, and which, laden as they are with blossom, during three full months of the later summer, blend their delicate pink with the greys and browns, the yellows and russets of the surrounding masonry. There is nothing which is grand or grandiose, staring or stately, about the whole. It is simply restful and homelike ; but the oriel projecting from the old hall, with its lofty gable, its weather-cock with the date 1661 still visible on it, its mullioned windows, its delicate traceries, its graceful finials, half revealed and half concealed by Virginian creeper, and topped by eagles ready for their flight, its massive and deeply chiselled coat of the Bingham arms, all in warm Ham Hill masonry, is a very dream in stone, an ideal, as it seems to me, of Tudor domestic architecture. The roof is high pitched, and many gabled, with huge stone tiles, the most fitting covering, I think, for Mediæval or Tudor, as thatch is for Jacobean houses. Their weight and outward thrust is

terrific ; but the builders of the old Manor Houses built for eternity or something like it, and the massive walls do not shrink from their Atlantean burden.

On the interior of the house I cannot dwell at length. The hall—as in most old Manor Houses, is its distinguishing feature ; indeed, it was itself, in olden times, “the House,” and answered for almost every purpose. The windows above the high panelling admit only a subdued light ; but the larger windows of the Tudor oriel, which is a later addition to the room, are aglow with light and colour. The date of the oriel is fixed, I think, by the character of its traceries, and by the coloured-glass medallions in the windows, of Philip and Mary, who are said to have visited the place. Their arms, the royal arms of England—are proudly quartered with those of France, of Castile, of Aragon, and of Leon ; while the lesser medallions contain the arms of the Bingham, quartered with those of other old county families, some of which, like the Horseys of Melcombe Horsey, and the Turbevilles of King’s Bere—the ill-fated Tess, now the most famous of them all—among them, have been long submerged. The old oak chairs, and chests, and cabinets, the settle, and the long dining-room table



BINGHAM'S MELCOMBE.

[To face page 342.]



with "the board" at the end, at which the lord of the manor used to sit "above the salt," and its legs battered by the convivialities of long bygone generations, bring the "other manners of other times" into strong relief. In the panels of the walls hang curios and relics of every description, drawn from many nations and many ages; and from above them, look demurely down contemporary portraits of Laud and Strafford, which, somehow or other, found their way into the abode of those who would have had little misgiving about the justice of their doom. For Bingham's Melcombe, it should be mentioned, was the headquarters of the Parliamentarians in Dorset, as Corfe Castle was of the Royalists. It has been even hinted that the portraits were looted by the Bingham from the Bankes.

Two pieces of furniture, one of recent introduction, the other co-eval with the oriel itself and with Philip and Mary, deserve a word of special mention: "The Moons" and the "Armada Table." "The Moons" are big round lamps, fixed on tall poles, with a catch at the lower end to fit into a stirrup. They used to be carried, in long bye-gone times, by postillions, booted and armed, in front of a coach, through wild or uninhabited parts of the

country, to guide or guard those who, not without some trepidation, were following behind. The panes are of horn, a significant indication of their antiquity, and there are arrangements for three lights in each. Few such relics of the insecurity of the coach roads in past times, it is believed, survive.

The Armada Table is an immense oval table of Spanish chestnut, curiously inlaid with tulip and other precious woods, and decorated with a strange central device, probably the crest of some Spanish grandee or admiral. It stands on an old sea-chest, and is said to have been taken from one of the Spanish galleons wrecked on the coast near Weymouth. "*Afflavit Deus et dissipantur.*"

The "powdering-room," the narrow turret stairs of stone, the numerous nooks and corners, the blocked-up or never-opened doors or doorways, the massive walls, some of them once external, but now enclosed by subsequent additions to the building, the cupboards everywhere, the steps in the most unexpected and break-neck places in rooms and passages, the Elizabethan chimney pieces of old oak, with figures carved on them, some strangely elongated, and others unmercifully compressed, so as to fill up every inch of room to



THE OLD GARDEN WALLS, BINGHAM'S MELCOMBE.



the ceiling, and with weird fiends guarding or threatening on the outer rim—all concur in bringing the dim and distant past into this twentieth century. Needless to add, there is a ghost; but upon that subject, as old Herodotus would have said, “let us preserve a religious silence.” Better to say too little about it than too much.

The surroundings are in keeping with the building. On the north side of the house is the “Ladies’ garden,” with its formal beds well suited for a blaze of summer flowers. The old brick wall round it is topped by heavy projecting coping stones, which, in the full glare of the sun themselves, enable large tufts of the shade-loving Scotch maiden-hair to nestle beneath them. Further along, a “Cyclopean” wall, built of the roughest stones, and with the queerest slopes and angles, makes room in its interstices, now, for the nests of the starling or the house-sparrow, and now, for full-grown plants of valerian and wall-flower, of fox-glove and snap-dragon. Beneath, heaves a mysterious, grave-like looking mound of turf, with an equally mysterious chamber deep below, above and around which you might well imagine “in the struggling moonbeams’ misty light,” and when

the tawny owl is hooting, or the white owl shrieking in the adjacent elm trees, that the shades of many generations of the Binghamms were fondly hovering.

Further on again, is a circular dovecote of stone without an angle in the whole, walls, roof, or top, like the Temple of Vesta at Rome, such as no well-conditioned Manor House of the Edwards or the Henrys would willingly have been without. Long borders of herbaceous plants, with grass walks between them, intersect the kitchen garden ; while, outside the latter, is a green walk, always shady and cool, sheltered by filberts and rhododendrons below, and by tall silver firs and sycamores above. There is a "lovers' seat" and a "lovers' walk." There is a lower garden with a little stream, which often comes down in spate. There is a picturesque old water wheel, and a meadow named "Swallow Flights," suggestive of one of the chief joys of summer. There are three fish ponds with little islands in them, the haunt of the moorhen and the wild duck, and there is a plantation surrounding the whole, in which the beech and the plane, the chestnut and the yew, thrive well, and which is carpeted in mid-winter—an acre of it or more—with snowdrops ; while, in the spring, the rest is covered with

primroses, wood anemones, wild hyacinths, and aconites.

On the west side of the house, is a bowling-green of inviolate antiquity, soft and mossy, well-suited for the sleepy game of bowls, in which our forefathers delighted, ill-suited for the more boisterous or active games of to-day. It must have been, I fancy, one of the crowning insults of the suitors of Penelope that they "played quoits and hurled their javelins" on the bowling-green of Penelope's long-absent husband, Ulysses; and cricket and lawn tennis seem an almost equal profanation to the soft and soporific turf of this. "How do you get turf like this?" asked an eager, inquisitive, pushful Yankee of the porter of a college which boasted of one of the most beautiful gardens in Cambridge; "we can't get any like this in *our* country." "We mows," answered the porter, with patriotic pride, with pardonable exaggeration, and, perhaps, not altogether unintelligible contempt for the great republic of yesterday and its almighty dollar; "we mows and we rolls for a thousand years." If the bowling-green of Bingham's Melcombe can look back, as it does, upon half that thousand years, it does pretty well.

But the most distinctive feature of the garden

is its yew hedge, one of the largest in the country, fourteen feet high and eighteen feet deep, taking us back, it is said, to the time of Henry VIII. Solemn and melancholy-looking enough through three-quarters of the year, it is, during the remaining quarter, when its young fresh shoots are putting themselves forth, a perfect mosaic of light browns, greens, and yellows. This outside ; but, as you pass through the archway which has been cut through the living wall of sombre green, and glance down the vista, on either side, of its gnarled and knotted branches interlacing with each other, without a sign of life, and which have not, for centuries, seen the garish light of day, you might fancy that you were looking at the blasted trees, in one of the weird visions of Dante's *Inferno*.

And now a word about the wild animals of the neighbourhood and their favourite haunts. Three miles from Bingham's Melcombe, is a large tract of woodland, called Melcombe Park. It has been, in a sense, "af-forested" ever since Saxon times. All round it—"the purlieus"—as they would have been called in the days of old—are big fields of rough pasture interspersed with smaller coverts, and tangled with thickets of blackthorn, and bramble, and gorse, and broom. On the south

side of it, and facing Bulbarrow to the north, rises Nettlecombe Tout, second only to Bulbarrow in height, and not much inferior to it, in the extent and beauty of its view. There is no house in or near Melcombe Park—no inhabited house, I ought to say—for the one house which was built, long ago, for a gamekeeper, is falling into ruins, since no one can be found to live in so remote a spot. The woodland is intersected by streamlets which trickle, or hardly trickle, in summer, along their deep-cut beds, but, in winter, become rushing torrents. In the stiff clay soil you might well expect to find primeval oaks or other giants of the forest. There is nothing of the kind; for the best of reasons, that in the life and death struggle with Napoleon, early in the last century, they were all felled to furnish forth some of the noble three-deckers which, under the guidance of Jervis and Collingwood and Nelson, were to set bounds even to Napoleon's ambition, and to secure to Great Britain the undisputed command of the seas. The natives still point with pride to the deep grooves in the ground, not yet quite obliterated by the all-obliterating hand of time, made by the great trunks, as they were being dragged off towards the dockyards.

This woodland tract, which has been left much

as God or Nature made it, is the home of wild animals and of still wilder birds. There, if nowhere else in the neighbourhood, the warrior carrion crow—for whom, though he has few friends, I might have much to say—and the magpie, and the kestrel, and the sparrow-hawk may breed in safety. It has never been over-preserved. Its pheasants are all wild pheasants, and its rabbits have never been deprived of half their liberty, of half their liveliness, and of a fair chance of their life, by wire-netting. To shoot at Melcombe Park is, therefore, to enjoy, not tame and murderous, but true, sport. Woodcocks love the spot; for it is good “boring” ground, and is seldom disturbed, except by the huntsman’s horn and the view-halloo. It is a great preserve of foxes which, even when they are most hardly pressed by the hounds, are unwilling to leave so secure a sanctuary. It is the home, too, of the graceful roedeer which, found though it is in most of the great coverts of Dorset—and in Dorset alone, as I have already remarked, of English counties—finds its surest refuge here. You may watch them, three or four together, feeding, in the evening, on the fields outside “the park”; or better still, you may catch sight of them on the crest of Nettlecombe Tout, or of “Dorsetshire Gap,” standing out, in

sharp and delicate outline, against the reddening sky.

On these hills, too, as in most of those round Melcombe, there burrows, deep beneath the surface, sleeping all the day, and trotting about all the night, that last and most interesting survival of the wild animals of the England of the past, the badger. You may never see or hear him; for he seldom quits his bed of dry leaves till after dark, and hardly ever fails to return to it before it is light. But you have the satisfaction of knowing that he is there, and you may see his footprints and marvel at the vast masses of chalk or sand, or gravel, which he throws up from his subterranean gallery. He is the most harmless and inoffensive of animals, living on grass or the roots of trees, on frogs or rats, occasionally varied by a few young rabbits. With his stout, short legs, his strong claws, his heavy elongated body, his skin which hangs so loose upon it, his curiously striped face, his powerful jaws, he is strong chiefly for defence. A pattern of cleanliness himself, he often allows the vixen fox, who is by no means so fastidious, to appropriate a portion of his catacombe and deposit her litter there, and he and his get on in apparent amity with her and hers. The days of badger-baiting are, happily,

gone by, but the murderous gamekeeper will take any amount of pains to dig out and kill the innocent creature; and it is a sport or murder which is annually renewed; for particular spots have as strange and mysterious an attraction for the badger, as other spots have for the raven. Year by year, you may kill one, and, year by year, another will come from you know not where, and take his place.

The otter, too, is not unknown at Melcombe. The stream is very small, and there are few fish in it, yet an otter was found—and killed, alas!—a year or two ago, at Bramblecoombe, close to the favourite station of the solitary heron; and the footprints of an otter are, at the moment at which I write, to be seen along the bank of the river in the Manor House garden. He is safe enough so long as he stays there; and those who have sympathised with the appeal which I have made throughout these chapters to landowners and to sportsmen to act upon the maxim of “live and let live,” and not recklessly and selfishly to sacrifice all wild life to “sport,” may be interested to hear that one of the largest landowners in the neighbourhood of Bingham’s Melcombe, Mr Everard Hambro, a great sportsman, and one whose estate swarms with game,

has, in response to those appeals, issued the laconic order to his gamekeepers, "No more pole-traps; ravens, if they come to Milton Abbey, to be encouraged to breed; badgers not to be molested, except inside the rabbit warrens." It may be hoped that he may see reason to extend his list of exemptions still further, and that his good example, as, in some measure, has already been the case, may be widely followed elsewhere.

And what about the people? They are much what you might expect in a spot so secluded and so free, as yet, from the centralising, modernising, ambition-moving influences of the Board School or the railway. The Dorset dialect, rich, racy, and expressive, still, to a great extent, holds its own among them. The parish register contains much the same family names from generation to generation, from century to century. A pretty cottage, about half a mile from the Manor House, is inhabited, at this moment, by a man of seventy-three years of age, who was born in it, has never had a day's serious illness, and has lived in it all his life. His father was born in the same cottage before him, lived in it to the usual span of human life, and died in it; and his grandfather, the same again, before him. The tenancy of one cottage by one family thus

covers well over a period of a hundred years. These are the true aristocracy of the soil, and they have a praiseworthy dislike, even in these days of unrest and of a general strong setting townward, to quitting it. A village girl is, with difficulty, induced to take a servant's place beyond the radius of a few miles from Melcombe, and if she does, the "*heimweh*" is too much for her ; she soon comes home again. A young man who had been induced, in an unguarded moment, to take a "place" the other side of London, got out of the railway carriage at Templecombe, only twenty miles away, thinking it was the metropolis, and could, with difficulty, be persuaded to go further afield. He, too, soon found his way back, and will, probably, never be induced to leave his home again. The mothers are inveterate stay-at-homes.

" Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learn to stray."

A woman of quite exceptional character and intelligence, who died, the other day, at an advanced age, and had lived most of her life at Bingham's Melcombe, boasted that she had been only twice in her life to Melcombe Horsey, a hamlet which lies a mile on one side of her home, and only once in

her life to Aller, a hamlet which lies a similar distance on the other. They "keep themselves to themselves," as they are fond of saying. Their ideal of womanhood—without knowing it or ever putting it into words—is very much that which was held up by Pericles to the quick-witted Athenians. "Those are the best women who get themselves least talked about by men, whether for praise or blame." But when a neighbour is ill or bereaved, there is no limit to their helpfulness and active sympathy. They are in and out of the house of sickness or of mourning, whenever they have a moment that they can call their own. A mother who is already overburdened with children, will take charge of the children of the sick or the dead, in addition to her own, and just as if they were her own. Whatever a kind heart can prompt or a neat and ready hand can do, she will do. When an unexpected death takes place, and there is an immediate call which a "long" and poor family can ill meet, to be, as they say, "in deep," mourning garb is promptly volunteered from many quarters.

Over and above this active kindliness, and quite apart from it, anything and everything which has to do with a death or a funeral seems to have a strange fascination for them. The noiseless approach of the

great leveller lends a natural dignity, and invests with supreme interest and pathos any one, be he high or low, rich or poor, who is about to tread the path which he needs must tread all alone. This is true everywhere; but it is, I think, especially true of the poor, and of the poor of Dorset. The dignity and importance of the dying man is shared, in their various degrees, by all who have to do with him. The relatives often discuss, in his presence, with the utmost plainness of speech, the question of how long he can "last," and talk, in all too familiar and positive language, of the secrets of that unseen world,

"The future and its viewless things,
That undiscovered mystery,
Which one who feels Death's winnowing wings
Must needs read clearer far than they."

To tell the sick man, under such circumstances, when you are taken up to see him, that he is looking better, is often regarded as something of an affront both to himself and to his belongings; while, should he himself, in some faint access, some feeble flicker of hope, when the bystanders know that no hope is, remark one day, that "he feels better in himself," there will seldom be wanting, among those who crowd round his bedside, a Job's comforter to tell him, with the kindest intentions, but in the

frankest language, not to cherish any false hopes. "Ah, John, it isn't they that feels the most, as dies the most."

Preparations for a funeral are often made long before a death happens, and the chief sufferer takes a keen interest, a sort of proprietary pride, in them. He will, sometimes, send for the undertaker and give minute directions about his own coffin. As often happens in everyday life, so also in that supreme moment, the solemn will, sometimes, pass into the grotesque, the sublime into the ridiculous. "How is your husband to-day?" inquired the squire of a neighbouring village about a labouring man who had long been at death's door, and whom he hardly expected to find alive when he called. "Oh sir," replied the wife, "he is ever so much better to-day. Now what do you think he did last night? You would hardly believe it. He got out of bed, came downstairs, and ate a good bit of the funeral ham, and is ever so much the stronger for it." With such ideas, a bit of furniture or an article of clothing which is of no value in itself, acquires a sentimental value; a valuable thing acquires a greatly enhanced value, if it has taken part in many such sad ceremonies. There is a picturesque little settlement in the heath country, which owes its origin to some

persistent "Squatters." It is called by the queer name of "Dick o' the Banks," after some "rude forefather of the hamlet," who had spent his life in erecting, or keeping in repair, the banks of sand covered with gorse and heather, which, thereabouts, serve the purpose of hedges. A lady whom I know intimately, on entering a cottage there, expressed her admiration for an extra large pewter teapot which stood in a corner cupboard. "Ah ma'am," said the owner, "I wouldn't part with he for anything; he've a' seen more than any of them. Now, how many funerals do you think he have attended? Seventeen—yes, seventeen." The teapot in question had, evidently, done duty, not only when a member of the family, but when any inhabitant of the hamlet, passed away, and was valued accordingly.

Men and women alike are often racy in their language. The cleverness of the retorts and repartees in Mr Thomas Hardy's dialogues, is not to be put down entirely to his dramatic genius. They are drawn from the life, and are redolent, as everyone who knows the county feels, of the climate and the soil. I have known labourers at Stafford—I know others at Bingham's Melcombe—who could hold their own in any such dialogue. A labouring

man who could not get his wife up in the morning in time to give him his breakfast before he went to work, walked out into his garden, one morning, at 6 A.M., took a look round, and then shouted, at the top of his voice, "Vire, Vire!" "Where, John, where?" cried his wife, rushing downstairs, half-dressed, in a state of wild excitement. "In everyone's chimbley but mine," replied the husband.

Feudal ideas, even in these democratic days, sometimes survive among labourers who have been habitually employed upon an estate on which the owner is resident and is one who is loved and deserves to be loved. One such squire there was, till two years ago, in this neighbourhood, Mr John Mansel-Pleydell, the beau-ideal of a country gentleman, a man of profound scientific attainments, but simple as a child, with a keen sense of humour, with benevolence written on every line of his countenance, and with a charm of presence and of manner which won all hearts. One day, after a battue on his property at Whatcombe—a function which he never more than half enjoyed himself, and that much, only for the pleasure it gave to his friends—while the spoils of the day were lying on the ground, remarked in a tone of sympathy, to one of the old beaters, "A lot of poor things killed to-day, Ted!" "Ees,

zur," replied Ted Aplin, in a re-assuring tone, "an' Gard Aulmighty mead 'em vor gennalman's sport." A gamekeeper who was once heard by him using violent language to a refractory dog, was sharply rebuked for his profanity. "There now, Mr Mansel," was the reply, "I'll tell 'e how it is; it is no martial use a-talking of *Bible* language to thic there dog, for he don't understand it, and he never 'ull." I do not know whether it was this same gamekeeper or another—anyhow, he was so far like him that he placed a special value of his own on "Bible language"—who named one of his dogs "Moreover." "Why on earth do you call him such a name?" said his master. "Why, zur, it's a real good Bible name for a dog. Ain't we told that 'Moreover, the dog, licked his sores'?"

Naturally, in a people who are so rooted to the soil there are not many who have much idea of distance or of proportion. Bulbarrow, whose range forms a "Great Divide" between north and south Dorset, between the valleys of the Stour and the Frome, is their unit, I would almost say, their *ne plus ultra*, of separation and of elevation. "We are on high ground," I remarked, two or three years ago, when shooting near Bulbarrow, on Mr Mansel-Pleydell's ground, to one of the old band of beaters

I have just mentioned. "Ees," he said, "zur, but look yonder," and he pointed to the clump of trees at Wynn Green, just over the Wiltshire border, which happens to be a few feet higher than Bulbarrow; "they do say that that be the highest clump in the world." I faintly suggested that there might be some higher clumps in Asia, if not in Europe. "Well, zur, I've a' been there," he replied, "and they do all say, about there, that it be the highest clump in the world," and I forebore to shake further his faith in its supremacy.

Some of the older inhabitants have, even now, never travelled by train or seen a railway. The postman, the carrier, the butcher's and baker's carts, are still the chief *media* of communication with the outer world. Yet their shrewd native sense makes them suspicious of politicians who deal largely in promises. They were caught indeed, some years ago, by the promise held out to them of "three acres and a cow," as the result of the proposed disestablishment and disendowment of the National Church. "I do know it be true," said the wife of one of them, "I've seen 'em a-measuring out of the ground." The gentlemen of the Ordnance Survey happened to have been there, just then, with their mysterious flags and poles and theodolites.

The three acres were all ready—all that was wanting was the cow! But “once bitten, twice shy.” They have not been caught by the doctrines of “ransom,” or by the promise of old age pensions, so often dangled before them. Nor can they understand, at present at all events, how a tax on foreign corn, and so, an increase in the price of bread, can redound to their ultimate advantage. A prominent statesman has recently complained that if there is so much as “a comma” wrong in one of his speeches, he is immediately called to account for it; but a comma misplaced has, ere now, turned the vote of one, and if of one, then, probably, of many, Dorset labourers. A clergyman whom I have the best of reasons for knowing, when Dis-establishment was to the fore, some years ago, breaking through his usual rule of non-interference in elections, asked some of his parishioners to vote for a candidate who would support an institution in which they were all so deeply interested. One of the labourers was not at home; but his wife answered for him, that her “husband would never vote for the like of he.” “Why not?” asked the clergyman. “Because he do use such terrible bad language.” “I have known him for many years, and I have never heard him utter an

oath!" "Doesn't he though?" said the woman. "What have you ever heard him say?" "Why, he says *peradventure*." "Well, there is no harm in that." "Isn't there?" triumphantly retorted the woman. "What does the Psalmist say? If I say 'peradventure,' the darkness shall cover me." It was clearly the comma that had done it!

The beliefs and customs of the inhabitants—the folk-lore, in fact, or such fragments of it as survive—are often curious. Good Friday is one of the most important days of the year, from a secular as well as a religious point of view; the secular, doubtless, owing to the religious. Many of the villagers still make a point of baking a batch of bread on that day, and of setting apart a miniature loaf to be carefully kept, hung up by the fireside, throughout the year. It will prevent the bread of other bakings from turning "vinny" or sour. A few crumbs of it, soaked in milk, are a sovereign specific for most of the ailments to which children's flesh is heir. In like manner, they sow gillyflower seed at precisely 12 o'clock on Good Friday, in the belief that the flowers will come up double. Potatoes "set" on that day, irrespective of the question—rather an important one, it will be admitted—whether Easter be early or late in the year, will have an important

influence on all the other "settings" of the season. The weather, indeed, of Good Friday and Easter Day is as important a factor in the growth of the hay crops, as is that of St Swithin elsewhere—

"Rain Good Friday or Easter Day,
Much good grass, but little good hay."

Many, indeed most of the current traditions, cluster, as is natural, round the great feasts or fasts of the Church. If a death happens in a parish on any day between the "two Christmases," 25th December and 6th January, there is a belief that twelve people will die within the year; hence, a painful and not altogether disinterested interest in the condition of anyone who seems to be nearing his end during that period. Three years ago, a death took place in the adjoining parish of Hilton, on one of these fateful days. The vicar, the Rev. E. Lee, happened to have only lately come there; and the sexton, as in duty bound, drew his attention to the circumstance, and told him what he must expect next year. Mr Lee thought little more about it; but, on adding up the death returns at the end of the following year, he was struck by the fact that there were exactly twelve, a number much above the average of four or five at most, for so

small a village! Fruit trees, blossoming out of season, are of evil omen for the family in whose garden they are found. Two years ago, an apple tree, in the same parish, put forth fine blossoms in November. A woman who was attached to the family and was passing by, remarked upon it to her friend. "I can't abide to see 'em," she said, "for they do mean trouble." In the following spring, four members or connections of the family died, and a fifth who was residing in the house had a serious illness. "Didn't I tell 'ee so"—there is always a grim satisfaction in the phrase—said the wise woman, half in triumph, half in sorrow, "I know'd thic apple tree did mean some harm to 'em." I wonder, for how many years to come, the beliefs in question will, owing to these and similar coincidences, have taken a fresh lease of life, even in this twentieth century. Probably for fifty years at least. It is not altogether to be regretted. The villagers know nothing of the fallacy, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, and they naturally take more note of the few striking occasions when the supposed consequent follows its antecedent, than of the many when it does not. Such fancies make the people more interesting in themselves, and give them a keener interest in what is going on around them. They throw a shade,

perhaps many shades, more of romance and imagination, of pathos and humour, on the course of their dull, prosaic lives.

The belief in the evil eye, and in the bewitching of cattle and persons, still lingers on in Bingham's Melcombe and the surrounding villages; and the remedy for it is very much that described and prescribed by Virgil and by Horace. It is to procure the heart of an animal and to set it, bestuck with pins which have never been put in rows on paper—for that would invalidate the charm—till it bristles all over with them, like the hedgehog or the "fretful porcupine," before a fire. Then, as it begins to glow and frizzle,

"Limus ut hic durescit, et haec ut cera liquescit,"

the power of the witch or wizard gradually diminishes, and when, at last, it bursts with the heat, the spell is broken and the witchcraft over. This ceremony was duly carried out, only a year or two ago, by a woman still living, for the sake of her grandson, who had been "under a spell." She told Miss Ellen Woodhouse—a lady who has lived all her life among the people, and knows them intimately and is known of them, and is one of my chief authorities on these matters—all about it, and assured

her that "the cure" was complete. Whooping-cough, in a child, is best cured by putting the sufferer on a donkey with the face towards the tail, and the figure of the Cross does the rest.

The name given to an animal, however harmless it may be, is sometimes prejudicial and even fatal to it. Last year, I passed by a man of quite average intelligence, who was working in his garden, and who told me that he had just killed a slow-worm. I said it was a pity to kill so innocent a creature. "Innocent! sir, they do say about here, that if a slow-worm do sting 'ee, you are sure to die within seven year." I represented to him that the slow-worm could not sting him, even if it would, for it had no sting; and even if it had, seven years was a good long time for a man of his age to look forward to. But it was all no good. Slow-worm, slow poison, slow death.

I will conclude this chapter on the Old Manor House and its Surroundings, with the mention of a belief which shows that the Dorset villager, whatever may be the case of those in other counties, has some eye to poetry and to beauty. In that large portion of Dorset to which I have so often referred in this book, the heath country, where the heather and the dwarf autumn gorse are often in their full

glory together—and last year was, I should think, almost unequalled in the splendour of both—the inhabitants believe that, as the blossom dies down, it is taken up to heaven and the purple of the heather is transformed into the gates of amethyst, and the yellow of the gorse into the golden pavement of the Celestial City. A rather material point of view, you may say. Perhaps so. “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him”; but for all that, the best and most beautiful things that we have seen or heard, the noblest and most single-hearted characters that we have known on earth, must to the unlettered—and, perhaps, not to the unlettered only—colour, inform, pervade that idea, that ideal of perfect goodness and beauty, which lies beyond all sight, and hearing, and knowledge, which alone can satisfy the yearnings of the soul, and is the surest earnest of a life beyond the grave. It is not the Empyræan; it is not the Beatific Vision; but it is, perhaps, the least unworthy setting which the imagination can conceive, for the atmosphere, the environment, the ante-chamber from which we hope to catch a not-far-off glimpse of both.

CHAPTER X

BIRD LIFE AT BINGHAM'S MELCOMBE

THE neighbourhood of Bingham's Melcombe is not so favoured, as regards either the number of its birds or the variety of their species, as some of those which I have described in previous chapters. There is little water or water-meadow, little bog, no heather. The nightingale is common at Melcombe Park, three miles away, but is a rare visitor to Melcombe itself. The flint-bestrewn ploughed fields on the uplands, and the "broad backs of the bushless downs," do not afford the kind of cover which attracts, in any number, the sweetest songsters of distant Africa, the blackcaps, the garden warblers, the white-throats, the willow-wrens, which add so much to the melodies and the charm of our English spring. There is not sedge enough to attract the sedge-warbler with its night-

long, rather rasping song, or the reed-warbler with its exquisite little nest, suspended within four reeds, or the black-headed bunting, their frequent companion.

On the other hand, there is, to begin with, a large rookery ; and no true lover of birds can have a rookery in his immediate neighbourhood without finding, during three months of the year at least, ample material for observation, for speculation, for amusement, for delight. We think we know the rook well, and there are few people, living even in the murkiest of towns, who can be wholly ignorant of his general look, who have never seen his nest, or heard his caw. But who has ever been able to get to the bottom of his character, or can reconcile the many contradictions in it? A bird so friendly and so sociable and yet so litigious ; so fearless of man during one quarter of the year, so shy and so suspicious of him during the remainder ; so staid, so sober, so solemn, so eminently respectable in appearance, and yet so droll and so unconventional in all his movements ; so aristocratic in his tastes and tendencies, and yet so democratic in his polity ; so tenderly solicitous for his young, as long as they are in the nest, or perching above and around it, yet so callous to

their sufferings, should any one of them happen to flutter or fall to the ground ; so sharp-sighted that they always know a gun from a walking-stick, and often, it is said, a Sunday from a working-day, and yet so inobservant as often to mistake a hamper, tied to a branch, for an old nest, and hasten to build their own new ones alongside of it ; living, lastly, in a community so highly organised that no fresh tree can ever be occupied without the formal consent of the whole body—that they never light upon the ground to feed, without stationing a sentinel to watch over their safety, on whose fidelity they implicitly rely, or to whose note of alarm or word of command they give instant and implicit obedience ; so law-abiding that they have often been seen to assemble on the ground, place some offender in the midst, as in a court of justice, discuss his case in all its bearings, and, after due deliberation, fall upon and put him to death, and yet who, as individuals, have no scruple of conscience in committing petty larcenies of every description on one another, if only they can do so unobserved, carrying off the sticks, the food, or even the eggs from the nest of their nearest neighbour. Reconcile, if you can, these and half a dozen other similar contradictions in this familiar and delightful tenant

of our parks or shrubberies, and then, and not till then, say that you have fathomed his character.

Who would not like to overhear, if only he could understand, the speeches for the prosecution and the defence—for, doubtless, some such there are—the summing-up of the judge, and the pronouncing of the sentence, in the solemn Areopagus of the rook nation? I incline to think that it must have been, not the exigencies of the rhyme alone, but a sense of the inherent fitness of things—it must have been their practice of assembling in these solemn convocations, their serious demeanour, their looks of mellow wisdom, their “customary suits of solemn black,” combined, perhaps, with the resemblance, presented by the queer white patches of skin at the base of the bill and round the chin, to the white tie and bands or “choker” of the parson of old times, which determined the important part assigned to the rook in the “lamentable tragedy of the death and funeral of Cock Robin” :—

“Who'll be the Parson?
 ‘I,’ said the Rook,
 ‘With my little Book;
 I’ll be the Parson.’”

Rooks build their nests, by preference, on the

very slenderest boughs of the very tallest elms, which they calculate are able to bear their weight ; and it is seldom that they make a mistake. It is seldom that a tree laden with nests—no slight addition, in themselves, to an already top-heavy elm—is blown down, whatever the force of the wind, or a single nest dislodged—so skilfully are they constructed—till the work of the breeding season is over. Most amusing is it to watch the rook in all the grotesque antics of his love-making, and most interesting is it to follow the progress of the nest from its first beginning to the very end. The love-sick bird makes desperate efforts to serenade in song the object of his affection, and his well-known caw sometimes rises into a shrill treble, sometimes sinks into a deeper bass. There are few things which love can not accomplish in the world, but it can not make a rook sing. Virgil, the poets' poet, the master of Dante, the author of so many of those single lines which, if heard only once, haunt, for ever afterwards, the chambers of the memory and the imagination, had, in his early youth, watched the rooks near his native Mantua—where or whereabouts alone, in Italy, it has been recently observed that they still build—in his later life, on the lovely Bay of Naples, recalled, in lines

of singular and clinging beauty, this episode of his youth :—

“Soft then the voice of rooks from indrawn throat,
Thrice, four times o'er repeated, and full oft
On their high cradles, by some hidden joy
Gladdened beyond their wont, in bustling throngs
Among the leaves they riot ; so sweet it is,
When showers are spent, their own loved nests again
And tender brood to visit.” *

It would be difficult to say whether this description, by Virgil, of the rook at the nesting time, or that of the rapid and noisy flight of the rock-pigeon when first disturbed from its rocky cavern, soon passing into a noiseless skimming, without one motion of its wings, or that of the swallow careering round the courts and colonnades of some Roman noble, sipping, as he flies, from the *impluvium* or the fish-ponds, or, again, that of the wild swoop of the eagle upon the swan in mid air, and the tempest of feathers which falls from his victim to the ground, shows the more accurate and loving observation of bird nature, or is expressed in more characteristically exquisite language.

Rooks are wasteful alike of their labour and of

* The translator is Mr James Rhoades, quoted by W. Warde Fowler in his charming *Year with the Birds*, p. 150.

their materials, in building. I have watched them at Melcombe fly over trees of every variety, suitable to their purpose, in order that they may visit Mount Pleasant, half a mile away, and there break off twigs for their growing habitation. Back the bird comes, with a stick sometimes longer than itself, which it often drops half-way, from sheer exhaustion. It never cares to pick it up, but goes straight back again to get another. If, during the delicate work of interlacing it with the fabric, he drops it to the ground, there it lies and will always continue to lie. The ground beneath a rookery is strewn with sticks numerous enough to construct double the number of the nests that there are in the trees above. The rooks at Melcombe have, of late years, deserted, in great part, the stately elms of the avenue, and transferred themselves to the younger and more vigorous ash and oak and fir trees of the plantation and the fish-ponds, two hundred yards away. The little migration is a danger-signal which all can understand; but nothing can be done to avert the danger.

There is an Indian proverb, which Lord Lawrence was fond of quoting, "Disputes about land are best settled on the land," and when the nest of a too self-assertive rook is built in a tree in

advance of the colony, and without its formal leave, the rooks assemble on the disputed tree, and discuss the matter, like so many sanitary inspectors, in all its bearings, and end by "certificating" or condemning it. "Not guilty, but don't do it again," seems sometimes to be the burden of their verdict; for it does not follow, even if the young are safely reared in the tree licensed for that year, that it will be occupied again the next. Something, perhaps, may have happened in the interim which makes the senators determine that it is unfit for rook occupation. Sometimes, so I have been told by one who watched them narrowly in early youth, a solitary position far from the rookery is assigned as a punishment to an obstinate marauder who has committed the unpardonable fault of being found out once too often. Social ostracism for the breeding season must be a severe penalty to a bird so eminently sociable as the rook; but, like ostracism at Athens, it seems to be carefully divested of all painful consequences afterwards; for, as soon as the young are flown, the culprit is allowed to return to the community, with all his old rights and privileges unimpaired. Unlike Draco of Athens, whose laws were said to be written, not in ink but in blood, and who

recognised but one penalty for all offences—death, rooks recognise degrees in guilt, and reserve the extreme penalty of the law for the more heinous.

The saddest anniversary in the calendar of "Parson Rook" is the massacre of the innocents, which takes place in May. Is it justifiable in a lover of birds, or not? Self-contradictory arguments are often advanced for it. The rooks, it is said, will become too numerous in the neighbourhood if the young are not killed off; or, again, they will become too few, for they will forsake it altogether. Rooks do sometimes forsake a rookery on a sudden, but not, I think, for this cause. For sentimental reasons, such as the pulling-down of the old house round which they have grown up, or even, it is said, the departure of the hereditary owner and the arrival of a new-comer, they have been known to leave it in disgust. And it is these partial migrations which suggest, perhaps, the true answer to the much-debated question whether rooks do more good or harm to the farmer. There is little doubt, I think, that feeding as they do, for nine months out of the twelve, almost exclusively upon grubs, especially the wire-worm which is so fatal to the crops, they are, if only they are moderate in number, of incalculable service to him. If

they do pull up some few ears of corn while it is growing, or eat a little of it when it is ripe, or pilfer the potato beds, a bird-boy, put in for a week or two at the critical time, is sufficient protection for the one, and a few skilfully interwoven threads will scare them from the other. But if they are allowed to multiply inordinately, as they would do if there were no rook-shooting, they must, in default of sufficient grubs, betake themselves to the crops; or, as they are accused of doing in dry seasons on the Scottish moors, they will destroy the eggs. Where they are moderate in number, watch them, if you will, while one portion of a big field is being sown and another is being turned up by the plough, and you will observe that they sedulously follow the ploughman to get the grubs which he exposes to view, while they leave the sower alone.

When rooks take to building in trees where the litter which they make would be objectionable, it has been found difficult to dislodge them by any method which is not destructive or cruel; but Sir Peter Lumsden, of Candahar and Penjdeh fame, a keen naturalist as well as sportsman, tells me that he accomplished his object in a way which was not only bloodless in itself, but incidentally afforded a striking and, I think, hitherto quite unnoticed proof

of the solicitude of the older generation of birds for the younger, whom they have enjoined or allowed to settle in their neighbourhood. A young colony of some thirty pairs of rooks, an offshoot of a much larger rookery also in his grounds, had taken possession of some trees under which ran a zigzag path, leading from his garden down to a stream which falls into the Spey, two miles off, at Craigellachie. This path he was anxious to keep spick and span ; but no expenditure of powder underneath the trees was accepted by the young colonists as notice to quit. It was suggested that the firing of some signal-rockets towards the nests after dark, might answer the purpose. A couple of dozen rockets, discharged in succession, seemed likely, with their loud explosions and showers of fiery stars, to be awe-inspiring enough in any well-regulated community of rooks. But the birds took no notice. They slept or appeared to sleep on, and not so much as a solitary caw evinced any alarm. The same expedient was tried the next night, with the same result. On the third night, double the number of rockets were fired, with no better success ; but at sunrise, next day, it was clear that the fathers of the original rookery had made up their minds that the triple night attack meant

danger. They held a council of war in the old home, rose from it in dense clouds, circled high in air round their more callous or short-sighted descendants, cawed their loudest, and then fell, with one consent, on the threatened nests. Within three or four hours, they had destroyed them completely and carried all the sticks away. It is some seven years since this happened, and they have never attempted to refound a colony in so uncanny a spot.

What is it, we may well ask, which, in spite of their intense hereditary attachment to a particular locality, a particular group of trees, and even a particular tree in a group, will sometimes lead a whole rookery, without a moment's warning, without any apparent cause, and under the most strange and cruelly unnatural circumstances, to desert, in a body, their nests and eggs, nay, even their callow or half-fledged young, leaving them to die of starvation? What indeed? But that such things do happen, on occasion, is certain. In 1847, for instance, a large rookery, in the Palace Garden, in the city of Norwich, was suddenly deserted by its inmates, in the middle of the breeding season. Last year, 1903, the rooks in the rookery of the Grange, Lord Ashburton's house near Alresford,

so well known to readers of Carlyle's *Biography*, left, in a body, their nests and nestlings, and have not since returned. The villagers predicted disaster to the family or neighbourhood, and disaster promptly came. In this year again, 1904, their fears have been raised to fever pitch by a similar abandonment of a rookery by its rooks at Candover House, only two miles from the Grange. What is going to happen next, they may well ask. Rooks, as a rule, build near an old and large house—chiefly, I suppose, because such houses have, as a rule, old and large elm trees near them; and as such elms have a way of coming down suddenly, the rooks which tenant them have need of all their second sight, and must always feel under a provisional notice to quit. A friend, Dr J. Brunton Blaikie, has described to me the circumstances attending the desertion of a rookery in Roxburghshire, which fell within his own observation, some twenty years ago. A new rookery had been formed in a clump of fir trees, which increased so rapidly that, in four years, it numbered a hundred and fifty nests. It was far from human habitation, and was, therefore, more open to be molested by egg or bird stealers. On one occasion, two men were in the act of robbing the nests, when one of them, who had

nearly reached the top of a tree, was attacked by cramp, and falling to the ground, broke his back. He lay where he fell for an hour or so before his companion could get assistance, and was carried home in a moribund condition. Whether there was any connection of cause and effect between the accident and the action subsequently taken by the rooks must be uncertain; but, next year, the rookery was entirely deserted by them, though the trees were in good health, and none of them had been felled, or marked for felling. The same friend has described to me the proceedings of a remarkable convocation of rooks which he was able to watch from close at hand. One day, in the month of August, he noticed a number of rooks approaching the trees of a small rookery in front of his house, which, at that time of year, were seldom visited by them. One of the rooks, flying about ten yards in front of the others, carried in its bill a twig, some eighteen inches long. It took up a prominent position on one of the trees, deposited the twig on the branch by its side, and then the business of the meeting began. First, one rook would talk in what seemed to be a set speech, and then they would all suddenly strike in, with a clamorous assent or dissent. Then, a second rook

would address the meeting, whether to second the motion, or to propose an amendment to it, and his peroration would be received or objected to in like manner. But the most interesting thing about it all was that the twig-bearer seemed to be the president of the assembly. The twig must have been a badge of office, like the spear of the auctioneer at Rome, or his hammer in England. It was like the Speaker's mace or the judge's black cap, a symbol, a something held in reserve. After half an hour, when the business was finished, and, as it would seem, the "noes had it," the president picked up the twig, dissolved the assembly, and, followed by the rank and file, departed, in the opposite direction to that in which they had come, to another rookery, a quarter of a mile away.

Verily, the rook sees far more than we give him credit for seeing, hears more than we think that he hears, thinks more than we think that he thinks. There are more things within his mental horizon than are dreamt of in our philosophy. Rook language, a language which is so near to us and yet so far off, would, probably, if only we could adequately interpret it, be as well worth knowing as many an African or Polynesian dialect, and might reveal secrets as difficult to decipher but as

well worth deciphering, as the cuneiforms of ancient Assyria or the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt. "Depend upon it," used to say Bishop Westcott, a delighted and life-long observer of the bird and not least, in his latest days, in the palace at Bishop's Auckland, "Depend upon it, the rook has a deep purpose in everything which he does." He was especially pleased to find that the rooks which had deserted the palace rookery on the death of Bishop Van Mildert, the last of the "Prince Bishops," in 1836, returned to it some fifty years later, soon after the beginning of his own episcopate. He used to watch them every morning through his window. Did they resent, I wonder, in the one case, the curtailment of the splendour of the see by the loss of its emoluments? Did they rejoice, in the other, at the advent of one, who, besides being a student of their polity, was destined to give to the see, as scholar, statesman, and saint in one, an almost unprecedented influence and dignity?

A continuous calendar of the doings of the rook would be as interesting, I think, as the calendar kept by old Gilbert White of the doings of his old tortoise, Timothy. They often amuse themselves, for a good part of the day, by soaring high in air, almost out of sight, and then, from time to time, by

dropping suddenly on each other, in sheer merri-
ment, or as if shot, to the ground. "The rooks
are blown about the skies," says Tennyson, a close
observer of the habits of the bird, and so they often
are ; but, as often as not, the reverse is true, and
they cling fast, through the tempest, to their
ancestral trees.

"The rook sits high, when the blast sweeps by,
Right pleased with his wild see-saw ;
And though hollow and bleak be the fierce wind's shriek,
It is mocked by his loud caw, caw.

Oh ! the merriest bird the woods e'er saw
Is the rook with his wild caw, caw."

During a good half of the year, as we shall see,
the rooks are not continuous tenants of their
rookery, but they always make a point of looking in
upon it, each morning and evening, as they return
from or to their customary roosting-place, just to
see how it is getting on. A few of them often
linger in the trees behind the rest ; while, in
autumn, they sometimes begin to repair such of
their nests as have stood the summer well, or, as
they think, may be useful, as a foundation, for those
of the next year. Thus, in the height of summer or
in early autumn, when deep silence seems to have

fallen upon tuneful Nature, when she is taking her siesta, and all the woods are still,

“The cawing rooks alone
Maintain the song of life,
And prate around the elms
With hoarse, rough colloquy,
A music in itself,
Or, if not music, joy.”

The rook is the most sociable of birds, not excepting even the starling. They feed in company, they breed in company—whereas the starlings, when they have once paired, disperse widely for the purpose—they roost in company; not indeed in their own rookery, but, what is a sign of greater sociability still, in a vast collection of rookeries—a rook Parliament—in spots which, for some unknown reason, have attracted them for generations. Shakespeare had noticed—as what did he not notice?—this peculiarity of the “sable pensioner.

“Light thickens, and the crow
Makes way to the rooky wood,
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse
Whiles night’s black agents to their preys do rouse.”

Two such “Parliaments of rooks” I have had the opportunity of watching, from early times—one

of them at Warmwell, four miles from my old home at Stafford ; the other, the property of the late Mr Mansel-Pleydell, the most delightful of men, a great lover of Nature, and, for many years, President of the Dorset Field Club, at Clenstone, five miles from my present home at Bingham's Melcombe.

Let me describe the Warmwell gathering. Warmwell is a beautiful old Elizabethan Manor House with a rookery close in front of it. From about an hour before sunset, flock after flock of rooks from Kingston and Came, from Stafford and Lewell, from Tincton and Moreton, and perhaps a dozen other rookeries, begin to arrive in rapid succession, till the number of the whole amounts to many thousands. They pitch down on a grass field about half a mile from the Manor House, blackening the ground, and are there joined by vast flocks of jackdaws which come in from the white chalk cliffs of the Dorsetshire coast, beginning with White Nose, some four, and stretching on to Lulworth Cove, some eight or ten miles away, the whole of them pitted with their nesting-holes. The solemn cawing of the rooks is thus enlivened with the shrill and cheerful chatter of the jackdaws. Meanwhile, the home rookery of Warmwell, "on hospitable thoughts intent," and quite alive to their responsi-

bilities as hosts, remain quietly at home, ready to receive their numerous, their innumerable, visitors. At last, the latter rise in a body from the field, sweep round and round, or rise high in the air with their myriad-throated cries, and then settle down on the trees reserved for them by their hosts at Warmwell. Once and again, as if moved by one common impulse, they all caw and chatter together in full chorus, and then, with equal suddenness, relapse into total silence. A stick, a leaf almost, might be heard to drop in the rookery. Then, as darkness comes on apace, not in one vast body, but each flock by itself, and each followed by the next at a definite interval of time, each of them "straight as the crow flies," and each led by the ragged-winged "many-wintered crow which leads the clanging rookery home," they wing their way to the "rooky wood," a deep, dark, and damp plantation between the water-meadows and the heather, more than a mile away, where they, as their fathers and their fathers' fathers have done before them, rest for the night. The Warmwell rooks, with the invariable etiquette, the true chivalry of hospitality, always remain on their own trees, till they have seen the last of their guests off safely first, and then, and not till then, "bethinking themselves," as Homer

would say, "of their own repose," follow in their wake—

"And down they come upon the happy haunts,
The pleasant greenery of the favoured groves,
Their blissful resting-places."

The jackdaw abounds at Melcombe ; and is like and yet unlike his constant companion, the rook. He is like him in his general appearance, in his habits, in his food ; but he is more lissome, more lively, quicker in his flight, more graceful in his movements, especially when he is on the ground, more full of mischief, more domestic, and much less afraid of man. He makes himself at home everywhere, and claims a share of the food of the pigs, the pigeons, the chickens. He levies ample toll on the garden crops, especially on a row of peas, till one of his number, suspended high as Haman above it, *pour encourager les autres*, warns him off for the rest of the season. He builds in our hollow trees, in our chimneys, in our castles, in our churches, in our cathedrals.

"There is a bird who, by his coat
And by the hoarseness of his note,
Might be supposed a crow—
A great frequenter of the Church,
Where, bishop-like, he finds a perch
And dormitory too."

No ruined castle, no cathedral in England, would know itself without its colony, sometimes its huge colony, of jackdaws. The jackdaw is to the English cathedral much what the smaller kestrel is to the Cathedral of Toledo or Seville, or to the Mosque of Cordova in Spain. He appropriates every gargyle, crowns every pinnacle or turret, perches by preference, chatters, and ruminates on the topmost vane. Well does the poet call him the "steeple-loving daw." He nests in every nook and cranny of the building; takes the statues of Prophets and Apostles, saints and martyrs under his special patronage; and penetrates through the air-holes of the tower into the interior, littering the steps, or filling the belfry with his ever-accumulating furniture. And what a lot he has to say about it all! In his more domestic character, he peers down, in the early morning, or even creeps down, into our chimneys, as though he would like to know what we are going to have for breakfast, or, at least, whether the housemaid is properly sweeping the room. Sometimes, indeed, he helps her to light the fire. Finding that so many of our chimneys were blocked by their nests, and that it was so difficult to clear them, I unwillingly placed wire-netting over the chimney-tops. One chimney was omitted. It

happened to have a rather broad flue, reaching down from parapet to basement. The jackdaws discovered the omission, and dropped down it, every morning, enough sticks into the fireplace to light the fire. Finding that the sticks did not "catch on" at the top of the broad flue, so as to make a foundation for the nest, they had, apparently, determined, with robust faith—as they will sometimes do in a tower—to build it right up, in defiance of all difficulties, from the very bottom.

In spite of all his shrewdness, the jackdaw is, like the rook, strangely wasteful of his labour, and shows much want of judgment while building his nest in a hollow tree. Why pile up sticks at all in a snug hollow, and why not content himself with that deliciously soft bed of cow's hair and wool and tags and rags of every description, which he always constructs at the top of them, and in which his five or six grey-green eggs, with their black spots and blotches, look so inviting? And why, again, has not hereditary or personal experience taught him that when he wishes to put "a round anything into a square hole," in other words, to get a long stick into a small opening, he must not take it by its middle, and try to thrust it in, in front of him—an impossible feat of gymnastics—but should hold it

by the end, and draw or coax it in, along with his slender body? The ground below the hole is strewn with the long sticks which, after many vain attempts, he drops with perfect *nonchalance*, and, like the rook, never cares to pick up again.

One of the biggest trees in our avenue, *statio notissima corvis*, in which no less than eleven pairs of jackdaws were accustomed to make their nests, was blown down, two years ago, crushing an unlucky cow who was taking her Sunday siesta beneath. It proved to be hollow throughout, and contained many bushels of sticks in every stage of decay, of hair and wool, of owls' pellets and owls' feathers. More than once, I have known a pert and pushing jackdaw to occupy a hole in a tree in which an owl was already sitting on her eggs, pressing her loosely constructed nest almost down upon the bird of wisdom—dignity and impudence in very close quarters. But, if not a truce of God, at all events, an armed neutrality, seemed, in each case, to have been established between them. Since the big tree fell, and after a conference which they held at once upon its stump, our colony of jackdaws—eleven pairs of them evicted at once from their ancestral abode, others of them shut out, about the same time, from the Manor House chimneys, and others,

again, by the churchwardens from the church belfry—have been hard put to it to find proper lodgings. But they have strong local attachments. They do not appear to have diminished in numbers, and they have made shift, sometimes, to occupy a hole which a starling might think too close quarters, and, sometimes, a slight depression in a tree, from which the nest stands up high in the light of day. Like the magpie, they know well how to accommodate themselves to circumstances.

Bring up a jackdaw from the nest, and he will be almost as amusing and mischievous as a magpie or a raven. He takes to his new position at once, and is on perfect terms of equality with the cat, the dog, the cocks and hens, and the cook. He easily learns to talk; and with his head held knowingly on one side, his bright bluish eyes, and his neat tippet of grey feathers, he is always ready for "treasons, stratagems, and spoils."

"When nobody thinks of any such thing
The little jackdaw hops off with the ring."

One characteristic of the jackdaw, and that the most lovable of all, I have never, I think, seen described, and that is his intense attachment to his mate. Though they go in flocks, the husband and

wife are, I believe, always true to each other. Even in autumn and winter, they may be seen sitting, a pair here and a pair there, on their favourite trees. But it is in early spring, before the work of nest-building begins, that their affection is most marked. There is no billing and cooing, no make-believe of flight and pursuit. They sit, side by side, hour after hour, without a movement and without a sound, contented with themselves and with the world, and quite absorbed in their own hearts' happiness.

We are fortunate enough to have in the grounds of the Manor House, not as permanent residents, but as lodgers for a good third of the year, the two birds which surpass all other British birds in the brilliancy of their colouring — the kingfisher, with its rich chestnut breast and the gorgeous greens and blues of its back, and wings, and tail; and the green woodpecker, with its crest of crimson and black, and its body resplendent with greys and whites and bright yellows and greens.

The little stream which I have already described as winding through the plantation, has, on one side of it, a steeply-shelving bank of sand, rising to the height of some thirty feet, and covered with trees. Miniature landslips take place in this bank from time to time, leaving behind them almost perpen-

dicular walls of sand ; and it is in these, for many years past—I can speak for some forty of them—that the kingfisher has found a secure home. The hole is always made by the bird itself, and is in a spot so sheer, that it is impossible for a rat or weasel, and so crumbling, that it is difficult for any larger foe, to climb up and disturb it. Its mouth is just large enough to admit the bird ; it broadens somewhat inside, and has a slight upward trend, till, at the distance of three feet or so, it expands into a little circular chamber, covered thickly with a bed of minute bones or bone-dust, on which repose in safety six or seven almost round eggs of glossy white, very brittle, and with a distinct tinge of pink from the yolk within. The bird always clings to the same hole, till she is disturbed by a new landslip, which sometimes exposes to view the nest itself, with the castings, pellets, and bone-dust of many years. The new hole may be discovered by the fish-bones thrown out of it, which trickle in large quantities, down the wall of sand, on to the more level ground below. It has a noisome odour—what Trinculo would call “a very ancient and fish-like smell”—and is filthy in the extreme. Yet the bird manages to pass in and out, many times a day, a paragon of beauty, without one smudge or smirk on

her lovely feathers. On leaving or entering her hole, she perches, for a minute or two, on a favourite branch of a tree just outside, which hangs over the stream; and there, if you have been fortunate enough to hide yourself sufficiently from her bright and piercing eyes, you may watch all that is going on. She will, perhaps, preen herself for a moment or two—though her feathers seem to need no preening—and then wait patiently for the ripple made by some small fish in the stream below. Down she plunges, head-foremost, into the water, glancing in the sunbeam, as she disappears. She hardly ever misses her prey, and, within two seconds, she reappears, glistening even more than before, with the water-drops spangling her feathers, and the silver sheen of the minnow, struggling but safely lodged, in her large bill. A few blows upon its head against the branch below serve to kill or stun it. With a jerk of her head, she throws it down her throat, and then is off, up or down stream, to her next favourite perch.

If you have managed to hide successfully, take care never to show yourself till the bird is well out of sight, or she will be on the look-out for you in your lurking-place when she returns, and you will see little more. Always remember that it is not

form or colour, it is sound or movement or scent, which scares the animal or bird you would wish to watch. Stand stock-still, and a hare or weasel will sometimes lollop right up to you, and look you in the face. A rabbit will run up almost against your legs; a woodpigeon will pitch, and remain perched, within a few yards of your head. Move a muscle, wink with your eye, and they are off. On that ~~same~~ bough, a few weeks later, if fortune favours you, you will, after often listening to the cries of the hungry and fast-growing young kingfishers, deep within the earth, have the happiness of seeing some four or five of them sitting in a row, side by side, and already decked in something like their full plumage, waiting with impatient patience, till the ever-active parent returns with a dragon-fly or a water-beetle, a gudgeon or a minnow, in her beak to feed them. If the stream is scantily supplied, as this one is, with fish—which, by the way, is, I think, the reason why they do not stay with us all the year—and the parent-bird has to go far afield to find them, she is enabled, by a kind provision of Nature, to swallow several of them, and bring them back half-digested, and therefore, doubly ready for the delicate frames of her ravenous young. The petrels or “mutton-birds” of the Furneaux Islands,

in Bass Strait—which, as Bishop Montgomery has shown, in an admirable description, in the *Ibis*, have to go very far away to fish, and remain away from their young all day—come home, in the evening, similarly laden.

The kingfisher's flight is straight, and swift as an arrow, down the main river. She announces her approach, a second or two before you see her, by a shrill cry, three times repeated, as unmistakable in its sound as it is difficult to reproduce. Down she comes, flashing like a meteor in the sun, often closely pursued, in amorous play, by her mate, a second meteor, re-echoing her cry. As she approaches, it is her bright chestnut breast which most attracts attention; after she has passed, it is the tail coverts of verderer blue, the most exquisite of all colours, which enchains and enchants the eye, and almost seems to leave behind it a trail of brilliancy. It is a little bit of the tropics transported, for a moment, into our more sombre northern atmosphere. In their flirtations, they will sometimes rise high in air and top the tallest trees. I have seen one fly over "the old thatched rectory" at Stafford, making for the nest which, in one year, it constructed in a strange place indeed—a deep railway cutting. It happened to be the very year

when the line had to be widened. Out flew the bird, almost in the face of the navvies who were unwittingly destroying her abode. They waited for her return, caught her in the hole, and killed her.

It is a strange instinct that enables the kingfisher, keeping, as he usually does, close to a running stream, to discover a small isolated pond, which has been recently stocked with fish, far away from it. There was a small pond, in my garden at Harrow, a mile from the Kenton brook, into which I put a few small gold-fish. The kingfisher, though a very rare bird in those parts, discovered them and came to claim his share. At the Down House again, two miles from Blandford and the river Stour, Sir William Smith-Marriott constructed a small pond in which to rear young *fontinalis* trout. It was surrounded by bushes, and quite hidden from view till you came close upon it. A pair of kingfishers, nevertheless, soon appeared to claim their perquisite; and I am afraid the owner preferred the *fontinalis* trout to the kingfishers. How did they find the pond? The nearest water to which they could be making their way from the Stour, was four miles away on the other side, and the intermediate country was as waterless as could be.

Little wonder is it, when the bird is so beautiful and its habits so remarkable, that legends began to cluster round it from the earliest time. Ceyx, the husband of Alcyone, was drowned. Mad with grief, the widow flung herself into the sea after him; and her father, Æolus, the lord of the winds, changed, so it was said, the faithful and ill-fated pair into halcyons or kingfishers, which built their floating nest upon the waves, and, for twice seven days, in the depth of winter, sat upon their eggs, while Æolus kept the winds in prison—those “halcyon days” which we talk of still.

“Blow, but gently blow, faire wind,
From the deserted shore;
And be as to the halcyon kind,
Till we are ferried o’er.”

The legend grew; and the halcyons themselves were soon supposed to be able to still the waves, and were addressed in prayer accordingly. “May halcyons smooth the waves and calm the seas,” prays the Sicilian poet, Theocritus. Nor did their knowledge of the winds, and their power over them, end with their lives. It clung to them even in death! The skin or the body of the halcyon, if hung up by a single thread, was supposed, in England, from the time of Queen Elizabeth almost

down to that of Queen Victoria, always to turn its bill to the quarter whence the wind was coming.

“But how now stands the wind?
Into what quarter peers my halcyon’s bill?”

says Marlowe. And Marlowe’s greater contemporary, Shakespeare, alluding to this same belief, speaks of flatterers who

“Renege, affirm, and turn their halcyon beaks
With every gale and vary of their masters.”

It will add, I think, a touch of interest to the bird, in the eyes of all admirers of Tennyson, to learn, as Sir Herbert Maxwell has told us in his *Memoirs of the Months*, that two well-known lines in *In Memoriam*,

“And underneath the barren bush
Flits by the sea-blue bird of March,”

which had long puzzled naturalists as to what British bird they could possibly be intended to describe, were pronounced authoritatively by the poet, towards the close of his life, to refer to the kingfisher. Every possible, and many impossible birds—the swallow, the wheat-ear, the blue-tit among them—has been suggested as answering, more or less—generally more — imperfectly, to the description. Tennyson was, often, not too gracious in explaining

the meaning of a difficult passage in his poems to an anxious inquirer. He had forgotten, he would say, that he had ever written it; his questioner had better find out for himself what it meant, or put any meaning that he liked upon it. It turns out, in this instance, that the couplet was a literal translation of a fragment of Alcman, which referred to the semi-fabulous halcyon, and was transferred by Tennyson to the English kingfisher. "The sea-blue bird of spring," ἀλιπόρφυρος εἵαρος ὄρνις,* may have been an accurate description enough of the legend-laden halcyon, as it was conceived by Alcman and other classical writers; but it is not a happy characterisation, for so close an observer of birds as Tennyson, of the English kingfisher. The kingfisher can hardly be said to be "sea-blue"; it never "flits" from bush to bush, but always dashes like an arrow down-stream; and it is, in no special sense, the "bird of March." The poet had to find a rhyme for his exquisite line

"When rosy plumelets tuft the larch,"

* βάλε δὴ βάλε κηρύλος εἶην,
ὅς τ' ἐπὶ κύματος ἄνθος ἀμ' ἀλκυνέσσι ποτῆται,
νηλεγές ἦτορ ἔχων, ἀλιπόρφυρος εἵαρος ὄρνις.

"Would, aye, would that I were a cock halcyon,
Which flies over the dancing waves, with the hen halcyons,
Light of heart, the sea-dark bird of spring."

and, on this one occasion, as it seems to me, among his severely accurate as well as supremely beautiful allusions to bird-life and bird-lore, he sacrificed something to the exigencies of the verse.

The kingfisher has many enemies—"collectors," anxious to put him into a glass case; ladies, the slaves of fashion, who wear him in their hats; anglers, who construct their flies out of his wondrous feathers; and, worse still, fishing clubs, who place a price upon his head, and leave an ignorant and merciless water-bailiff to carry out their murderous behests. Degenerate followers these of Izaak Walton and his "gentle craft"; for it is they who, above most men, ought to take pleasure in that which adds so much beauty and romance to the riverside. But better days are coming. The Thames Conservancy has already, as Mr Cornish tells us, made kingfishers to be comparatively common birds, in the Thames Valley. The love of Nature and the love of beauty are growing powers; and the kingfishers, it is to be hoped, may themselves expect, ere long, true "halcyon days."

Next after the owl and crow tribes, I have always thought that the "climbers"—the woodpeckers, the nut-hatch, and the tree-creeper—are the most interest-

ing class of birds to watch. Like the Hamadryads of old, the guardian wood-nymphs who were believed, each of them, to come into existence, to flourish, and to die with the particular tree they guarded, their existence seems to be bound up with trees. Their life is in the woodlands, and on the trees, and nowhere else. It is seldom indeed that they perch on trees; but they cling to them and they climb them; they burrow and they nest in them. They seldom touch the ground; they never condescend to search a commonplace hedgerow. They are found only where trees are abundant; and they are most abundant, where those trees are old, and knotted, and gnarled, and tempest-riven, and memory-laden, as they are in Savernake and Sherwood forests.

And how admirably is their structure adapted—as is also that of the sloth, and other animals and birds of South America which seldom touch the ground, except by accident—to a strictly arboreal life! Look at their claws, pointing two forward and two backward, and so securing a firm grip of the tree. Look at the stiff feathers of the woodpecker's tail, pointing downwards and inwards, to serve as an additional support. Look at the narrow and shallow breast-bone, enabling the bird to press its body close against the bole of the tree. Look at

the long and flexible neck, enabling the wryneck, for instance—the snake-bird, as it is often called—to describe, this way and that, a full circle with it. Look at the long and strong and sharp bill ; and, above all, look at the marvellously retractile tongue, which shoots out to more than twice the length of the bill, so that it can reach the deepest recesses in a tree. It has a tip of horn furnished with little bristly feathers pointing backwards and coated with a glutinous secretion, of which, each time that it is drawn back into the mouth, it finds a fresh supply in the glands within, and from which no flying or creeping insect, once touched by it, can escape.

The green woodpecker is as cheery in his bearing as he is remarkable in his structure and brilliant in his plumage. Few sounds are more joyous than his “laugh” in spring, his yaffala, yaffala, yaffala, which has given him one of his commoner local names, the “yaffle.”

“The skylark in ecstasy sang from a cloud,
And chanticleer crow'd, and the yaffle laughed loud.”

Few birds have a greater variety of local and of pet names — rain-bird, hew-hole, wood-knacker, wood-spite, wood-pale, whet-isle, hufle, eccle, hecco,

jar-peg, and popinjay among them—a sure sign that he is a general favourite. Delightful, too, is the resonant tap, tap, tap, given in rapid succession—“the woodpecker tapping the hollow beech-tree”—which may be heard to a considerable distance, and is often the first thing to apprise you of his presence. Watch him at his everyday work. He is shy and solitary, but his size and his bright colouring enable you to see a good deal. He generally pitches low down on the trunk of a tree, and works his way upward in spirals, like the warrior soldiery round Trajan's Pillar, showing himself now on this, now on that side of the tree. He searches every nook, “tipper-tapping” as he goes, now to dislodge any solitary insect which may be lurking beneath, now to strip off a big bit of bark which will expose any number of them at once, and now, perhaps, for future purposes, to test the solidity or otherwise of the tree. He always uses his tongue rather than his beak to secure his prey; and when he nears the top of the tree, having examined, on his way up, one or two of the bigger branches which point upwards, he never goes down again, as a nut-hatch would do with ease, to scan the parts that he has missed—he appears to be unable to do so—but flies off, in a series of graceful and regular curves,

to a neighbouring tree. It should be mentioned that, at one time of year, the green woodpecker forms a marked exception to the rule that climbing birds spurn the ground; for he is passionately fond of ants and their eggs, and you may see him searching the pastures, and passing, with long and very awkward hops, from one ant-heap to another made of swelling, but still, more or less solid turf, and tearing them open with his bill; or he will visit the much larger and looser heaps, made by the big black ants, out of fir-tree spines, in the fir-wood, and, plunging his long red tongue at full length into them, will draw it back again, quite black with warmly protesting ants.

But, best of all, watch the woodpecker, if you have the chance, at the time of the year when she is most accessible—when, that is, she is either at home, or preparing the home that is to be. I was able, last year, to watch the whole process from beneath a thick yew-tree in the shrubbery, just fifteen yards from the chestnut she had selected. When by “sounding” a tree—a beech, a birch, or an elm by choice—the woodpecker has found one which she believes to be hollow at the heart, she pecks her way towards it by a geometrically round hole. More often than not she is mis-

taken, for you may find ten holes which have been begun, and then abandoned, for one which she has been able to complete. She wastes no time, her mistake once discovered, and goes elsewhere. When, at last, she has penetrated a tree which she finds to be rotten at the core, she has the far more serious labour—for she has so little room for her body and so little purchase for her bill—of carrying it down a foot or two at right angles; and then, upon the collected wood-dust, without making any further nest, she deposits her five or six eggs. They are of a brilliant white, which, while they are unblown, allow delicate lines to be seen through them, extending from end to end of the egg, as delicate and regular as the exquisite little lines on the blossom of the wood-sorrel.

Let me describe briefly what I saw and heard while watching this particular woodpecker. The chips flew fast and thick from the soft chestnut tree, as the bird clung to the bole, and kept hammering away at the spot she had selected, only six feet from the ground. The surrounding grass was soon white with them. There was no attempt at concealment, though a path ran close by. Indeed, for one woodpecker which I have



THE GREEN WOODPECKER.
From a Drawing by G. E. Lodge.

[To face p. 408.]

10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
110 120 130 140 150 160 170 180 190 200

known to go to the enormous trouble of carrying away the chips to a distance, I have known ten which left them exactly as they fell. The excavation of the hole was the work of many days ; and, as soon as it was finished, a pushing, self-assertive starling determined, as it too often does, to appropriate her labours. The woodpecker is a peaceful bird ; I would almost say, she is for "peace at any price." "Anything for a quiet life" would seem to be her motto. She will allow herself to be ejected by a starling, whom she could kill with one stroke of her powerful bill. She will even allow, as I have more than once observed, a nut-hatch, a bird not half her size, to take possession of her hole, and calmly to plaster it up with mud, till it is of a size to admit no bird bigger than herself. Strange that a bird so eminently pacific, or one so closely akin to her as the black woodpecker, *picus martius*, should have been selected to be the sacred bird of Mars ; that she should have been allowed to join the she-wolf in nursing his infant twins, Romulus and Remus ; and should, ever afterwards, have been regarded not only as one of the most weather-wise of birds, but also as one of the most trustworthy birds of omen, by the most martial people that ever lived, the conquerors of the world, the ancient

Romans. *Martio cognomine insignes*, says Pliny of them, *et in auspicatu magni*. I ought, perhaps, to add that the starling has such a disagreeable odour, and is of such dirty habits, that no fastidious and self-respecting bird, like the woodpecker—let alone her peaceful disposition—would ever enter a hole that he had long occupied. In vain, did I try to scare away starling after starling, which came “prospecting” for itself; and it was not till I had shot four of them in succession that the others gave up their burglarious attempts, and the woodpecker, which, together with her mate, had been sadly looking on, from some apple-trees in the adjoining orchard, returned to her hole, pulled out the starling’s wisps of hay, laid her eggs, and hatched her young in safety. As I came, day by day, to the hole, the bird would climb up and look out at me with her crimson crest and her beautiful eyes, and then fall back with an “All right; I see you mean no harm” sort of expression. It was interesting, too, to feel, with the hand, the stifling heat developed inside the hole, as the young birds drew towards maturity in their narrow quarters, and to listen to the extraordinary hissing sound, concentrated and almost demoniacal in its intensity, when I tapped the tree gently outside. It reminded me of what Milton calls the

"universal hiss" which came from the fallen angels, when they found themselves suddenly transformed into serpents,

"Who hiss for hiss returned, with forked tongue
To forked tongue."

And most interesting of all it was to see the young birds when they were fully fledged, but had not yet found their wings, clinging on to the bole around the nest or climbing up it, till, at the first alarm, they slunk back into it, as into a safe harbour of refuge. The hole is now occupied by a colony of bats; and I fear that no nut-hatch or tit-mouse—no, not even a starling—will ever deign to enter it hereafter.

I have dwelt at length on some of the birds which are most characteristic of Bingham's Melcombe; at others I can only glance. The moor-hen is a constant inhabitant of the fishponds and the brook. The wild duck often builds her nest on one of the islands in the ponds, and gives to her adventurous brood their first lesson in navigation there. Vast flocks of wood-pigeons, from the beech-woods of Milton Abbey, visit the fields and coombs in winter, while, in summer, the woods are resonant with their love-lorn plaints and

with the low crooning of the turtle-dove—one of the most soothing sounds in Nature. The jay, the most beautiful and restless of his tribe, with the rich chestnut plumage of his body, his dainty crest incessantly rising and falling, his wing-coverts with their alternating bars of white and blue, sometimes awakens the plantation with his harsh scream, which, in the breeding season, drops into a short, low love-note. A pair of wheat-ears may, occasionally, be seen on the open downs, while two or three pairs of stone-chats are always flitting nervously from furze bush to furze bush, on the hill above the house, or perching on the topmost spray, and vigorously scolding the intruder. The yellow-hammer is to be found in every hedge which skirts the chalk downs; the bullfinch descends in numbers, in mid-winter, to levy heavy toll upon the buds of fruit trees in the garden; and the goldfinch, the most gaudy and perhaps the most vain of birds, which, a few years ago, seemed to be dying out everywhere, is now, thanks to the Wild Birds' Preservation Act, becoming one of the commoner finches. Three years ago, in autumn, I saw some hundreds of them congregated together in a berry-laden double hedge; and two or three pairs always deign to visit the garden in the spring, building

their nests in the yew-hedge or in the apple-trees. A large holly-bush in the garden, close to the house, which is always thickly covered, by the end of October, with fast-reddening berries, loses them all by the middle of November. They are all knocked down or carried away by hosts of missel-thrushes, song-thrushes, and blackbirds. All other holly-bushes in the neighbourhood they keep in reserve, till they are hard put to it in the sharpest cold of winter. It is useless to try to scare them away from our and their pet bush. Why is this? Is it that these particular holly-berries are sweeter in themselves than others, or are they sweeter in the eyes of the beautiful marauders because their sweetness is a stolen one? They knock off and waste many more than they carry off; and, feeding on their remnants, we have, within the week in which I am writing this, seen twice over, for the first time, in this neighbourhood, the shy and solitary hawfinch. Among rarer birds still, I may mention a hoopoe which was seen, and happily not shot, in April last, and was, afterwards, observed unhurt, in a quite different part of Dorset; the stone curlew or Norfolk plover, one or two pairs of which breed regularly on the flint-bestrewn uplands of Piddletrenthide, a few miles away; and three

buzzards, two of which pitched on a tree close to us, in the sharpest frost of last winter, while the third was seen lazily beating over the rabbit warren, in one of the later autumn fogs.

In the early summer morning, the bowling-green is the favourite resort of all those birds who are most alive to the fundamental truth that it is the early bird that catches the worm. Look out of the window upon it, at the very first dawn of day, and listen to

“ the earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds ”

in the shrubs close by. You may catch sight, if you are lucky, of the hedgehog scuttling off when, like the ghost in *Hamlet*, he “scents the morning air,” from the soft sweet grass, which he has been searching all night for insects, towards the friendly shelter of the old yew-hedge. You may see the rabbit which has managed, in spite of every obstacle, to push his way into the garden, taking his last nibble at the forbidden fruit or flower. Presently, down upon the grass, there comes, with a flop, a cock blackbird, still more than half-asleep; he is followed by another and another; then drop in the song-thrushes; then the more lively and active starlings; then the “careful” and friendly robin;

and then the little, cringing, unobtrusive hedge-sparrow ; till the whole of the lawn is dotted with bird life in action.

But the true proprietors of the bowling-green—our and its prime favourites—the two birds which will hardly leave it through the live-long summer's day, do not appear till a little later in the morning : the spotted fly-catcher and the water-wagtail. The fly-catcher claims, as his department, the lawn-tennis net, the croquet hoops, the garden seats. From these, he watches for each passing gnat or fly or moth, and, with quick, graceful, noiseless flight, dashes out on them as they pass. You hear a slight click of the slender bill ; and the bird, after sometimes catching, in repeated zig-zags, three of them in one flight, returns, perhaps a dozen times over, to his post of observation, before he shifts to the next. His mate, you may be sure, is sitting on her nest not far away ; nor will it be long before you see him pay her a visit. He does not mind being watched ; though, as you approach the sanctuary, he will do his little best to scold you away with his tremulous complaint.

But a still more welcome and still more cheery tenant of the bowling-green is the pied or water-wagtail—the “ polly-wash-dish,” as the country

people call him. He seems to have taken a lease of it for life; he claims it as all his own, and resents any intrusion upon it. Watch his movements; he runs two or three yards with his little nimble feet. He stops and thinks; his long pied tail, longer, in proportion, even than the magpie's, and something of the same colours, shaking up and down, as if it could not be still. He dashes off again, taking a turn now to the right, now to the left, as he catches sight of his tiny prey. Now and again, he springs a foot or two into the air, to catch a fly upon the wing. Then he dashes forward again, as if he were in for a long race, faster than you would think such slender legs could carry him. But, again, he stops dead short, digging his bill into the grass, as though he would bury himself in it, his tail high in air, as though he would turn a complete somersault—and a somersault it would often be, were it not for the grip that his long, slightly curved hind claw has upon the turf. His nest is safely hidden in the creepers of the house, or in some niche or ledge of the garden walls. You are anxious to discover it; he is equally anxious to conceal it. When his mouth is crammed with insects, he will fly to the roof-ridge, and, perfectly aware that you are watching him, will watch you

in turn, for many minutes together, leaving his mate and young ones to hunger as they may, rather than betray his family secret. The wagtail frequently migrates from one part of the country to another, and sometimes congregates in flocks; but he pairs for life, and the same pair always reappear, sometimes, when they are least expected, and all the more welcome from their occasional absence, on their favourite lawn. Their devotion to one another is extreme, as a scene I witnessed some forty years ago, but which is as fresh in my memory as if I had seen it yesterday, will show. I will relate it, and with it I will conclude this chapter and this book.

A wagtail had been killed, probably by a stone, and was lying dead in the middle of the circular drive in front of the Down House, Blandford. The survivor seemed beside himself with grief. Like Eve in Paradise, he "knew not what death was," or, at most, the reality was only gradually breaking in upon him. He kept running up to the body with loud and plaintive call-note. He called, but there was no response. He caressed the body, caught hold of it with his little bill, coaxed it to move, drew it after him for a yard or two. He even tried to rise with it in the air. Then, like

one distraught, he dashed away to the edge of the gravel drive, and then, as quickly, dashed back again, to go through the same mournful processes. Sometimes he would fly right off, in wavering, uncertain flight, as far as the eye could follow him, as though he could bear the sight no longer ; but, without stopping to rest, he hurried back in straighter and quicker flight, unable to tear himself away, or in the vain hope that something might have happened in his absence. This long-drawn tragedy, this abandonment of grief, I watched from the window, throughout the afternoon, till darkness came on. Next morning, the body had disappeared, and I saw the survivor no more.

APPENDIX

THE LONGEVITY OF THE RAVEN

HESIOD'S lines, the *locus classicus* on the subject of the great age of the raven, which, according to his calculation far surpassed that of Methuselah, are as follows :—

ἔννεα τοι ζῶει γενεὰς λακέρυζα κορώνη
ἀνδρῶν ἡβώντων ; ἔλαφος δὲ τε τετρακόρωνος,
τρεις δ' ελαφούς ὁ κοραξ γηράσκεται.

The Latin poet Ausonius (*Idyl*, xviii., 1), translated and amplified them thus :

“ Ter binos deciesque novem super exit in annos
Justa senescentum quos implet turba virorum.
Hos novies superat vivendo garrula Cornix,
Et quater egreditur cornicis sæcula Cervus,
Alipedem cervum ter vincit Corvus.”

While Sir Thomas Browne, in his *Vulgar Errors*, iii., p. 138, has, in his turn, translated the translation thus :

“ To ninety-six the life of man ascendeth,
Nine times as long that of the chough extendeth,
Four times beyond the life of deer shall go,
And thrice is that surpassed by the crow.”

The "crow" is, of course, the raven, κόραξ, corvus. On the question of the great duration of the stag's life, the *longa et cervina senectus* of Juvenal (*Satire*, xiv., 251), the two chief prose authorities of antiquity differ. Aristotle denies that the stag is remarkable for its longevity. Pliny, on the other hand (*Natural History*, viii., 32), says that it is "well known" that he lives to a great age, and gives, as an instance of it, that several stags, round whose necks Alexander the Great had hung collars of gold, were killed, a hundred years later, still wearing the collars, over which the flesh and skin had grown so much that they were almost encased in them (*adoperti jam cute in magnâ obesitate*).

As regards the still greater longevity of the raven, Hesiod's statement seems to have been taken for granted both by later poets and prose writers. Cf. Juvenal, who says of Nestor's long life (*Satire*, x., 246), *exemplum vitæ fuit a cornice secundæ*. The life of a raven in captivity is so unnatural in itself and is exposed to so many special dangers, that it cannot be said to prove much either way. I may mention, however, that of my own three pet ravens, while one was killed by an accident, the other two appeared to die a perfectly natural death, one at seventeen, the other at about twenty-two years of age. The only tame raven of which I have been able to discover indubitable proof that it lived beyond the usual term of human life, is that described in pages 163-166; the friend and companion, first, of a porcupine, and then of a seagull. So distinguished and accurate an ornithologist as Mr J. H. Gurney

could not have stated that the age of the bird was sixty, at the time he gave it away to his friend, unless he had convinced himself of its truth ; and I have the testimony of several witnesses that it lived for at least twenty years after that, under the care of its new owner. It began to lay eggs, as I have stated in the text, at the mature age of eighty, a great feat, one would think, even for a raven. I have given, in pages 156-159, what I think to be the most probable explanation of the general belief in the longevity of the raven, and have pointed out how far, in my opinion, it is founded on facts.



INDEX

- ADAM, his *Field and Forest Rambles in New Brunswick*, 24 *note*
 Æolus, the lord of the winds, 400
 Aidan, 118
 Ainger, Canon, 3
 Ainsworth, *Rookwood*, 80
 Alban's Head, St, 85
 Alcyone, 400
Aldhelmi Enigmata, 182
 Alexander the Great, 110
 Alfred the Great, 136
 Aller, 355
Allocco, the, 16
 Alps, 84
 Alresford, 380
 Alternon, 122
 Altum, Dr, his analysis of owl pellets, 10
 Animals, Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to, xiii
 Ansty, 322
 Antiochus Epiphanes, 18
 Antony, St, legend of, 115
 Aplin, Ted, 359
 Apollo and the raven, legends of, 88-90
 Ararat, Mount, 84
 Aristotle on the longevity of the stag, 420
 "Arthur, Passing of," version of, 147
 Arundel Castle, owls at, 41
Arvicola agrestis, 49
 Athanasius, St, legend of, 115
 Athelhampton, 334
 Athens, owls of, 19 ; convocation of ravens at, 100
 Atlas range, 84
 Ausonius, his translation of the lines on the raven, 419
 Azores, discovery of, 118
 BADBURY RINGS, 38, 333, 337 ; ravens at, 142
 Badger, 351
 Badon, Mount, 147
 Bagber Copse, 204
 Bagshot, 151
 Bahran, one of the Sassanid kings of Persia, 53 ; partially converted by an owl, 54
 Balkans, the, 84
 Bankes, Mr Ralph, 148 ; on a battle-royal between ravens, 96
 Barnes, William, lines from, 319 ; his birthplace, 338
 Bayeux, tapestry of, 138
 Beachy Head, 84

- Benedict, St, legend of, 116
 Bere Regis, 44
 Bible, mentions of the raven in, 77, 87
 Biddulph, Mr, 191
 Bindon Abbey, 333
 Bingham, Charles, 206
 Bingham's Melcombe, 2, 12, 27;
 Coombe of, 174; the Old Manor
 House at, 333; its age, 334; posi-
 tion, 336; the gateway, 338; "Gate
 House," 339; the court, 339; roof,
 341; interior, 342; the hall, 342;
 "The Moons," 343; "Armada
 Table," 344; the garden, 345;
 bowling-green, 347; yew hedge, 348;
 wild animals of, 348; birds, 369
 Birds, hermit, instances of, 318-323
 Birds of Bingham's Melcombe, 369
 Birds, Society for the Protection of,
 xiii
 Bismarck, Prince, 148
 Bittern, the, 177
 Blackbirds, 414
 Blackmoor, Vale of, 337
 Blaikie, Dr J. Brunton, 381
 Blandford, 104, 335; grammar school
 at, 2
 Blandford, Milton Abbas School at,
 141
 Bloxworth, 334; Heath, 174
 Bockhampton Hang, 338
 Bolt Head and Bolt Tail, 85
 Boyle, his book *On Colour*, 92
 Bramblecoombe, 352
 Brand, his *Popular Antiquities*, 314 note
 Branksea Island, 338
 British Museum, white raven in the, 92
 Broadmayne, 208
 Broughton, Higher, 51
 Browne, Sir Thomas, on the ravens of
 Norfolk, 173; his translation of the
 lines on the raven, 419
 Bryanston Park, 174
 Bu-ru-ru, the, 16
 Bubo, the, 15
 Buckland, Frank, 34
 Buckland Newton, 174
 Buffon, the naturalist, 259
 Bufo or mofo, 16
 Bulbarrow, 360; view from, 337
 Bull, H. G., *Notes on the Birds of
 Herefordshire*, 28 note
 Bullfinch, 412
 Bunker's Hill, 285
 Bunting, the black-headed, 268, 370
 Bush magpie, 304, 309
 Bustard, the, 177
 Butler, Rev. G. W., 208
 Buxton, Mr Edward N., 178
 Buzzards, 177, 414
 CAME, 387; Park, 174
 Candover House, rookery deserted by
 rooks, 381
 Carew, Thomas, lines from, 209
 Carlstadt, 314
 Carrhæ, 18
 Carthage, Roman aqueduct of, 101;
 nest of an owl and raven at, 102
 Castle Hill, 338
 Caucasus, 84
 Cerne Abbey, 333
 Ceyx, legend of, 400
 Chaucer, his mention of the magpie,
 326
 Chaldon, 86
 Charborough Tower, 338
 Charles the Great, 136
 Charles I., King, on the miracle of
 Elijah and the ravens, 131
 China, method of catching wild ducks
 in, 258
 Chough, the Cornish, 177
 Christchurch, 151

- Cilicia, 148
 Clenstone, gathering of rooks at, 387
 Colles, Mr, on the traits of the short-eared owl, 51
 Collins, Sir Robert, 150
 Coope, Rev. Frank, 22
 Cooper, Dr Jacob, incident with a brown owl, 60
 Coot, 255, 265 ; nest, 269
Corbies, The Two, 123
 Corea, 83
 Corfe Castle, 174, 333
 Cornish, Mr, xiii ; his essay, 202
 Cornwall, 85
 Corvo, De, poem of, 182
Corvus corax, 76
 Cowper, William, lines from, xiv
 Craigellachie, 379
 Cranborne Manor House, 334
 Crassus, 18
 Craterus, and his ravens, 161
 Creech Barrow, 338
 Crow or corvine tribe, 76 ; the warrior carrion, 350
 Cuckoo, 206, 279 ; supposed hibernation, 208 ; size of the egg, 210 ; manner of laying it, 211 ; its foster-mother, 211 ; mode of ejecting the young, 212
 Culliford Tree, 338
 Culpepper's Bowl, 308
 Curlew, 255

 DABCHICK, 255 ; eggs, 276
 Daniel, Dr Williamson, 104
 Darwin, Charles, 46
 Dasent, his *Story of Burnt Njal*, 135
 note
 Davy, Sir Humphry, his *Salmonia*, 323
 Dean, Forest of, 49
 Denmark, ravens of, 112,
 Derrick, his *Image of Ireland*, 324
 Devilish or Dewlish brook, 320
 Devon, 85
 Dewlish, 27 ; brook, 320
 Dickens, Charles, *Barnaby Rudge*, 80 ; his pet raven, "Grip," 170
 Digby, Mr John, his story of the raven and seagull, 163
 Dixon, Mr, xiii
 Dorchester, 33, 335
 Dorset, 2, 85 ; characteristics of, 82 ; mediæval abbeys, 333 ; castles, 333 ; manor houses, 334 ; dialect, 353 ; character of the people, 353-363, beliefs and customs, 363-368 ; magpies in, 307
 Down House, Blandford, 157, 399
 Drake, the, 242, 245 ; his period of moulting, 249
 Dresser, his *Birds of Europe*, 25 *note*
 Duck, a pintailed, 266, 278
 Duck, a shoveller, 267, 275
 Ducks, tufted, 266, 283 ; nest, 278
 Ducks, wild, 239, 411 ; cosmopolitan, 240 ; omnivorous, 240 ; their courtship, 241 ; nest, 243 ; number of eggs, 243 ; process of incubation, 244 ; the ducklings, 245 ; maternal anxieties, 246 ; the shooting season, 247, 251 ; want of wisdom, 248 ; wariness, 251 ; stalking, 251-253 ; flight shooting, 254 ; method of constructing a decoy, 258 ; practice of, in China, 258
 "Duck-hunt," 69
 Duddle plantation, 310
 Duillius, 103
 Dun-bird, 269 ; her eggs, 269
 Dun Cliff, 338
 Dunkerry Beacon, 337

 EGDON HEATH, 151, 307 ; pits of, 308

- Einsiedeln, Monastery of, 119
 El Monte de las cuervas, or "the raven rock," 118
 Elbruz, Mount, 84
 Eliot, George, 259
 Elizabeth, Empress, murder of, 111
 England, Archdeacon, rector of West Stafford, 231
 Essex, destruction by voles, 49
 Ethandun, victory of, 136
 Euphrates, the, 18
 Evans, Mr, *The Songs of Birds*, 27
 Exmoor, forest of, 173
 Eye, Evil, belief in the, 366
 Eyemouth, 190
- FALCONRY, sport of, 68
 Farøe Islands, 83
 Finn and her magpie, 314
 Flamborough, 84
 Flokki, his expedition, 139; discovery of Iceland, 140
 Florentius, 116
 Floyer, Mr John, 233
 Fly-catcher, the spotted, 415
 Foster, Professor, 76
 Fowler, Mr Ward, xiii, 74; his *Year with the Birds*, 374 note
 Fox takes shelter in a magpie's nest, 300
 Frampton, Mr, 155
 France, magpies in, 313
 Francis Joseph, Emperor, appearances of ravens to, 110
 Frederick Barbarossa, Emperor, legend of, 148
 Freshwater Cliffs, 84
 Frome, 186; River, 251; Valley of the, 309, 360
 Fryer Mayne, clay-beds of, 184
 Furneaux Islands, the petrels or "mutton-birds" of, 397
- GAD CLIFF, 85
 Gadwall, 266; her nests, 269, 272, 279
 Galapagos, islands of, 46
 Galicia, over-run by voles, 49
 Galton Common, 174
 Gamekeeper, definition of a good, 233
 "Gate House" at Bingham's Melcombe, 339
 Geese, wild, 256
 Gerbert, Pope Sylvester II., 115
 Germany, superstitions about ravens, 112; folk-lore on the magpie, 312
 Gill, George, 233
 Glastonbury Tor, 174
 Goldfinch, 238, 412
 Gould, anecdote of, 64
 Grange, the, rookery deserted by rooks, 380
 Greenland, discovery of, 140
 Grimm, his *Teutonic Mythology*, 314 note
 Guadalquivir, 240
 Gubernatis, Angelo de, *Ornithological Mythology*, 314 note
 Guest, Dr, 147
 Gurney, Mr J. H., 163; on the age of a raven, 420
 Guthrun, surrender and baptism of, 136
- HAMBRO, Mr Everard, 352
 Hardy, Mr Thomas, 151; *Return of the Native*, 192; raciness of his dialogues, 233, 358; his birthplace, 338
 Hare, a, pursued by owls, 48
 Harrier, 177
 Harrow, pet raven at, 170
 Harting, Mr, 50
 Hawfinch, 413
 Hawker, Colonel, on wild-fowl shooting 247
 Hayne, Mr Robert, 84
 Hebrides, 83

- Hedgehog, 414 ; destruction of eggs by, 277
 Henry, Prince, the "Navigator," 118
 "Hermit birds," instances of, 318-323
 Herod Agrippa, 18
 Heron, a solitary, 320
 Herons, 255, 309
 Hesiod on the longevity of ravens, 156, 419
Hibou, the, 16
 Hilton, 364
 Himalayas, 84
 Hindu Kush, 84
 Hood, his lines on the raven, 121
 Hoopoe, 413
 Horace, his epithet for the raven, 157
Hornugle or *storugle*, 16
 Horsmonden Rectory, Kent, 22
 Houghton, Coombe of, 174
 House-martins, 188, 218. *See* Martins
 House-sparrows, 195. *See* Sparrows
 Hudson, Mr W. H., xiii, 146, 173 ; on the mischief done by voles, 49 ; his *Birds and Man*, 175 *note* ; on the chatter of a magpie, 302
 Hugh, St, of Lincoln, 119
 Hungary over-run by voles, 49
 Hyde Park, a solitary magpie in, 319
 Hylas, on the owl's method of issuing from the egg, 43
 ICELAND, 83, 239 ; discovery of, by ravens, 140
 Indians, North American, their belief in owls, 24 ; in ravens, 111
 Inkpen Beacon, 337
 Iona, 118
 Ireland, 84 ; history of the magpie in, 324
 Italy, name for the magpie in, 292, 313
 JACKDAW, 389 ; characteristics, 389, 393 ; nests, 390 ; want of judgment, 391 ; attachment to his mate, 393
 James's Park, St, magpies in, 306
 Jay, the, 412 ; her nest, 305
 Jeffreys, Richard, xiii
 Jervis, victory of, in 1797, 118
 Johnson, Dr, his *Tour in the Hebrides*, 92
 KEARTON, Mr, xiii
 Keats, John, his line on the owl, 55
 Kenisata-l-gorab, or "The church of the raven," 118
 Kenton brook, 399
 Kestrel, 350, 390
 Kingfisher, 238, 394 ; nest, 395 ; mode of securing her prey, 396 ; feeding her young, 397 ; flight, 398 ; appearance, 398 ; instinct, 399 ; legends, 400 ; mention of, in poetry, 401
 Kingsley, Charles, his definition of a good gamekeeper, 233
 Kingston, 387
 Kingston Lacy, 96 ; park of, 141, 148
Kippôz, the, 16
 Kites, use of, 68 ; the fork-tailed, 177
 Knighton, 184, 231 ; Heath, 36, 44 ; raven's nest on, 150 ; Wood, 67
 Koran, mention of the raven in, 77
Kôs, the, 16
 Kurile Islands, 83
Lady of the Lake, lines from, 88
 Lamb, Charles, his *Essays on Elia*, 131 *note*
 Land-rail, 273
 Langton, 23
 Languedoc, belief in ravens, 112
 Lapland, 239
 Lapwings, 268
 Lawrence, Lord, his proverb, 375
 Lebanon, the, 84

- Ledbury, 191
 Lee, Rev. E., 364
 Lewell, 251, 387
 Lilford, Lord, 326
 Lindisfarne, Isle of, 118
 Littlewood plantation, 157
 Lob Nor, 240
 Longfellow, H. W., on the Raven Inn, 120
 Lowell, Mr, 58
 Ludbrog, Ragnar, a famous sea-king, 135
 Lulworth Cove, 387
 Lulworth, West, 86; ravens at, 175
 Lumsden, Sir Peter, 378; his mode of evicting rooks, 379
 Lycabettus, 100
 Lytton, Bulwer, *Eugene Aram*, 35 *note*
 MACGILLIVRAY, 76; his *British Biras*, 99 *note*, 298; observations on ravens, 98
 Madeira, discovery of, 118
 Maeterlinck, *The Life of a Bee*, 299
 Magpie, 281, 350; confined in a cage, 281; appearance, 283; tail, 284, 301; eyes, 284; beak, 284; strength of its leg, 285; characteristics, 286, 325, 328; exaggeration of his misdeeds, 288; habits, 289; name, 290-292; construction of her nest, 292-297; legends, 293, 295, 311; affection for his offspring, 297, 317; for a brood of ravens, 300; chatter, 302; varieties of, 304; resorts, 306-309; geographical range, 311; in classical mythology, 312; in German folk-lore, 312; Italy, 313; France, 313; Scandinavia, 314; revenge of a, 314; belief in England, 315; appearance of a single, 316, 323; case of a solitary, 318; history of, in Ireland, 324; mention of, in poetry, 326; as a pet, 327; compared to the raven, 327; power of imitating human speech, 328; thieving habits, 329; love of sport, 331
 Maiden Castle, 333
 Mallards, 238, 266; colouring of, 238
 Mallet, his *Northern Antiquities*, 140 *note*
 Mansel-Pleydell, Mr John, 359, 387
 Maria Christina, Archduchess, 110
 Marlowe, Christopher, his lines on the kingfisher, 401
 Martins, 218; habits, 218; nests, 219
 Mary's Loch, St, 51
 Maximilian, Emperor, 110
 Maxwell, Sir Herbert, xiii, 50; his *Memoirs of the Months*, 401
 Mayor Pond, 38
 Meggett, the, 51
 Meinrad, St, legend of, 119
 Melcombe Horsey, 354; Park, 348, 369
 Mendips, 337
 Mercia, Penda, king of, 118
 Merganser, 283
 Mexico, lakes of, 240; massacre of ducks by Indians, 257
 Meyer, H. L., his story of an owl, 70
 Mildert, Bishop Van, 384
 Millicent Hill, 155, 310; raven's nest at, 156
 Milton, his lines on the swan, 79; on the raven, 131
 Milton Abbas School, Blandford, 141
 Milton Abbey, 174, 333, 411
 Montgomery Bishop, 398
 Montgomery, James, his lines on the magpie, 327
 Moor-hen, 255, 411
 Moreton, 155, 387
 Morocco, belief regarding the owl, 25
 Mount Pleasant, 375

- NAPIER**, Sir Charles, victory of, in 1833, 118
Nash, T., on the hoot of the owl, 57
Nelson, victory of, in 1797, 118
Nettlecombe Tout, 349
New Forest, 49, 151
Newton, Professor A., 76 ; his observations on ravens, 96
Night-jars, 58 *note*, 208
Nightingale, 279, 369 ; mention of, by Milton, 79
Nigidius, on the habits of the eagle owl, 43
Nile, the, 240
Norfolk mere, a day on a, 262 ; ravens of, 173
North, Christopher, *Noctes Ambrosianæ*, 317
Norway, fiords of, 240 ; magpies in, 283, 288, 306
Norwich, Palace Garden, rookery deserted by rooks, 380
Notes and Queries, 122
"Nunnywutch," meaning of the term, 207
Nut-hatch, the, 403

ODIN, the raven, the sacred bird of, 134 ; his title "Hrafna-gwd," 138 ; his two pet ravens, 138
Oriole, the golden, 238
Orkney Islands, 83, 239
Oscines, or birds of omen, 78
Oswald, St, legend of, 118
Otter, 352
Ovid, his lines on the owl, 25 ; legends of the raven, 88, 89
Owain, a sea-king, his army of ravens, 138
Owl, the brown or tawny, 54 ; character of its hoot, 54, 56-59 ; appearance, 55 ; the young, 55 ; partiality for music, 59 ; incident of a, 60 ; affection for its young, 64 ; for each other, 65 ; laying eggs, 67 ; food, 67 ; strange experiences, 68 ; use in falconry, 68 ; duck-hunt, 69
Owl, the eagle, 40 ; character of the female, 40 ; prognosticates evil, 42 ; mode of flying, 43 ; issuing from the egg, 43 ; fighting, 43
Owl, the long-eared or horned, 36 ; its habits, 36 ; eyes, 37 ; nest, 37 ; sound made by, 39
Owl, the short-eared, 44 ; its appearance, 44 ; habits, 45 ; geographical range, 46 ; disabilities, 46 ; normal position, 47 ; character, 47 ; service rendered by, 49 ; fecundity, 50 ; traits, 51 ; cries, 52
Owl, the white or the barn and the screech, 5 ; resorts, 5 ; mode of catching mice, 6 ; mechanism of the ear, 8 ; number of pellets, 9, 10 ; method of eating a mouse, 10 ; laying eggs, 11 ; the owlets, 11-13, 38 ; colour and texture of the eggs, 15 ; cries, 15, 16 ; variety of names, 15 ; beliefs in, 17, 21, 25 ; appearances of ; 18 ; prejudices against, 19 ; epithets, 19 ; predictions, 19 ; shape of the face, 21 ; the snowy, 23 ; unpopularity amongst birds, 27
Owlets, 11-13, 38
Owls, the, 1 ; varieties of, 2 ; characteristics, 4 ; lines on, 28 ; legend of, 29 ; protection of pigeons, 31
Oxus, the, 240
Oyster-catcher or sea-pye, 283

PAMIR, the, 240
Paradise Lost, lines from, 108
Parrot, his powers of talking, 328
Partridges, 264, 277 ; nest, 277

- Paul, St, the Hermit, 116
 Peel, Lord, anecdote of a hare pursued by owls, 48 ; his thatched cottages, 190
 Peewit, 58, 255
 Penda, king of Mercia, 118
 Penny, Rev. J., headmaster of Blandford Grammar School, 2, 142
 Pentridge, 338
 Peregrine falcon, 177
 Peshawur, ravens at, 100
 Petrels, or "mutton-birds," 397
 Phalanthus and the white raven, 91
 Pheasant, the cock, 238 ; a hermit, 321 ; laying her eggs, 275, 277 ; nest in a tree, 279
 Philip II. of Spain, 18
 Piddlethrenthide, 413
 Pigeons, 411 ; protected by owls, 31
 Pliny, extract from his *Natural History*, on the great-horned owl, 42 ; on the funeral of a raven in Rome, 104-106 ; on the omens portended by ravens, 123 ; on the capabilities of a magpie, 328 ; on the longevity of the stag, 420
 Plover, the golden, 255
 Poacher, definition of a, 233
 Pochard, 266
 Poe, Edgar Allan, his poem on the raven, 80, 124
 Poitou, "pye-worship" in, 313
 Pole-trap, abolition of, xii ; cruelty of, 26 ; protest against, 26, 72 ; demand for the abolition, 73
 Poole, 151 ; Harbour, 338
 Pope, Alexander, his lines on the magpie, 327
 Portland, Isle of, 337
Provincial Names of British Birds, extract from, 120 note
 Puddleton Heath, 23
 Puddletown, 33, 307 ; pits of, 308
 Puffin, its razor-like bill, 95
 Pyrenees, 84
 QUANTOCKS, 337
 Quixote, Don, on King Arthur changed into a raven, 147
 RABBITS, 263
 Ramsbury, 175
 Rats, 32 ; procession of, 33
 Ravens, 76 ; characteristics, 76, 86, 159 ; mention of, in the Bible, 77, 87, 114, 128 ; in the Koran, 77 ; by Shakespeare, 79, 90 ; in fable, 80 ; historical and literary pre-eminence, 80 ; geographical range, 83-85 ; nest, 94, 145 ; fund of humour, 86, 328 ; legends of, 88-90 ; a white, 91 ; names, 92 ; food, 93-97 ; respect for his neighbours, 95 ; love of carrion, 97 ; their *modus operandi*, 98 ; passion for solitude, 99 ; convocation at Athens, 100 ; character of the beak, 102 ; tributes to their strength and courage, 103 ; funeral of a, 105 ; prophets of evil, 108 ; mention of, in poetry, 108-110, 121, 124 ; appearances of, to the House of Hapsburg, 110 ; powers after death, 111 ; beliefs in, 111 ; in Sweden, 111 ; other countries, 112 ; the raven-stone, 112 ; services rendered to St Athanasius, 115 ; St Antony, 115 ; St Benedict, 116 ; St Vincent, 117 ; St Oswald, 118 ; St Hugh of Lincoln, 119 ; St Meinrad, 119 ; neglect of their young, 127-130 ; parental affection, 133 ; the sacred bird of Odin, 134 ; the raven-standard, 135 ; messengers of the gods, 138 ; act as pilots, 139 ; eggs, 145 ; nests at Badbury Rings,

- 142; at Savernake Forest, 150; Knighton Heath, 150; movements and intonations of voice, 152; love for his mate, 153; early maturity, 154; nest at Millicent Hill, 155; age, 156, 419-421; proverb on, 156; attachment to places, 157; as pets, 159; sociability, 159; powers of mimicry, 159; anecdotes of, 160-164; friendship with a dog, 161; with a seagull, 163; love of mischief, 167; pet raven of Stafford, 167-170; "Jacob," 170; disappearance of, 173; his eye, 328
- Raven Tarn, 151, 310
- Ravencroft, Mr W., 130 *note*
- Rawlesbury, 333
- Reed warblers, 268, 279, 370
- Rempston Heath, 174
- Rhoades, Mr James, his translation of Virgil's lines on the rook, 374 *note*
- Ridley, Mr Frank, on the solitary magpie in Hyde Park, 319
- Rig Veda, hymns of the, mention of the magpie in, 311
- Ringsted, cliffs of, 231
- Robins, 414
- Rodney, victory of, in 1780, 118
- Roe-deer, 309, 350
- Rome, funeral of a raven at, 104-106
- Rooks, 370; characteristics, 370; their solemn convocations, 372, 382; nests, 372; love-making, 373; waste of labour, 374; their punishments, 376; migrations, 377; service to the farmers, 377; eviction of, 379; instances of desertion of rookeries, 380-382; sociability, 386; gathering of, at Warmwell, 387
- Roxburghshire, rookery deserted by rooks, 381
- Rutger's College, New Brunswick, 60
- SALISBURY, Bishop of, his right to be called the "Bishop of Ravens," 175
- Saltburn-on-Sea, a raven killed at, 104
- Sandpiper, 255
- Sandwich Islands, 46
- Sandy, 48
- Saragossa, 117
- Savernake Forest, 149; characteristics of, 149; raven's nest at, 150
- Sayer's Wood, 67
- Scandinavia, 83, 239; the raven in, 134
- Scaup, 283
- Scotland, 84; havoc wrought by voles, 49
- Scott, Sir Walter, on the hoot of the owl, 57; his lines on the raven, 109
- Seagull and a raven, friendship between, 163
- Sea-pye, 283, 291
- Sedge-warblers, 268, 279, 369
- Selborne, 14
- Senlac, victory at, 138
- Shaftesbury, 338
- Shakespeare on the hoot of the owl, 56; references to the raven, 79, 90, 125-127; his lines on the magpie, 303; on the rook, 386; on the kingfisher, 401
- Sheldrake, 283
- Shelley, on the hoot of the owl, 59
- Sherborne Abbey, 333; Castle, 333, 338; Park, 174
- Sherwell, Mr J., his story of a raven, 161
- Shetland Islands, 83, 239
- Sinai, Mount, 84
- Sirikol, Lake, 240
- Sixpenny Hanley, 146
- Skeat, Professor, on the names given to the raven, 93
- Smith, Canon Reginald, 235
- Smith, Colonel Walter Marriott, 100

- Smith-Marriott, Sir William, 399
 Smollett, *Roderick Random*, 80
 Smugglers, 231
 Snipe, 255, 268
 Somersetshire, magpies in, 307
 Southey, Robert, his lines on the raven, 121
 Sparrow, 187, 195, 415 ; neglect of her young, 132 ; merits, 196 ; demerits, 196 ; number of broods a year, 197 ; nests, 198
 Sparrow-hawk, 350 ; his solitary life, 322
 Spencer, his mention of the raven, 121
 Spetisbury, 142
 Spey, the, 379
Sporting Anecdotes, Original and Select, extract from, 22
 Stafford, pet raven of, 167-170
 Stafford Rectory, 184 ; interior, 185 ; staircases, 186 ; thatched roof, 187 ; the birds of, 187, 194 ; outbuildings, 189 ; the old tithe-barn, 227
 Stafford, West, 2
 Stag, longevity of, 420
Standard newspaper quoted, 314
 Stanley, Bishop, 306
 Stanley, his *Familiar History of Birds*, 24 *note*
 Starlings, 187, 200, 414 ; characteristics, 200 ; in search of insects, 201 ; instinct of imitation, 202 ; eggs, 203 ; sociability, 204 ; roosting-places, 204 ; evolutions at sunset, 205 ; their dirty habits, 410
 Stevenson, H., *Birds of Norfolk*, 173 *note*
 Stock House, 212
 Stone-chats, 412
 Stone curlew, or Norfolk plover, 413
 Stour, the, 399 ; valley, 360
Strix flammea, or the white owl, 5
 Studland, 85
 Sturminster Newton, 335
 Suliman mountains, 84
 Swainson, Rev. Charles, *Provincial Names of British Birds*, 113 *note* ; on ravens' neglect of their young, 129, 130
 Swallows, 188, 206 ; first appearance of, 213 ; nest, 214 ; evolutions, 215 ; song, 216 ; "puddling the clay," 217 ; maternal love, 217
 Swan's *Speculum Mundi*, on the neglect of ravens for their young, 130
 Swans, mention of, by Milton, 79 ; black, 91
 Sweden, ravens of, 111
 Swifts, 188, 219 ; date of arrival, 222 ; materials for their nests, 222 ; eggs, 223 ; experiments on, 224 ; powers of flight, 225 ; at sunset, 226 ; impulse of migration, 227
 Swyre Head, 85
 TAURUS, Mount, 84
 Taylor, J. H., 142
 Tchad Lake, 240
 Teal, 266
 Templecombe, 354
 Tennyson, his lines on the owl, 7, 32, 34, 58 ; his epithet for the raven, 157 ; lines on the rook, 385 ; on the kingfisher, 401
 Thatched cottages, duration of, 190 ; its antiseptic qualities, 191
 Thatching, art of, 191-194
 Theocritus, the Sicilian poet, 400
 Thessaly over-run by voles, 49
 Thian Shan Mountains, 84
 Thiselton-Dyer, Sir William, his *English Folk-Lore*, 314 *note*
 Thrushes, 414
 Thurlestone, 22

- Tigris, the, 18
 Tinkleton, 231, 387
 Tit, the long-tailed, her nest, 198
 Tithe-barn, the old, 227
 Toad, stoned by a magpie, 331
 Tree-creeper, 58 *note*, 403
 Tree-magpie, 304
 Treviss, George, 233
 Turtle-dove, 412
 Tweed, the, 52
 Tyrol, belief in the raven-stone, 112
- Ulula*, the, 16
- VALENCIA, 117
 Valerius, 103
 Vincent, St, legend of, 117; martyrdom of, 179-182
 Vinland or Greenland, discovery of, 140
 Virgil, his lines on the raven, 86; on the rook, 374
 Voles, the devastating, 49-52
 Voltaire, his objection to the name "Holy Roman Empire," 336
- WAGTAILS, foster-parents to a cuckoo, 212
 Walker, Rev. M. G., *Natural History of the Ancients*, 24 *note*
 Walsingham, Lord, 271
 Warblers, sedge and reed, 268, 279
 Wareham, 151; fair day, 207
 Warmwell, 231, 334; gathering of rooks at, 387
 Water-rail, the, 255; her nest, 272
 Water-rat, 255
 Water-wagtail, 415; his movements, 416; nest, 416; devotion to each other, 417
 Waterton, Charles, 76; his *Essays*, 13, 121 *note*; his observations on owls, 13, 31; his pet raven, "Marco," 170; on wild ducks, 241; on the number of magpies' nests in his park, 288
 Wedmore, Peace of, 136
 Wessex, 136
 Westcott, Bishop, his observations on rooks, 384
 Whatcombe, 359
 Wheat-ears, 412
 Whin Green, 338
 Whinchat, 274
 White, Gilbert, on the habits of the barn owl, 13, 31; on its mode of flying, 55; his story of the "Raven Tree," 133; proposed tribute to his memory, 178; on the night-jars of Selborne, 208; on the hibernation of the swallow, 209; his observations on swifts, 220; biography of his tortoise, "Timothy," 221
 Whitechurch Down, 38
 Whitenose Cliff, 85, 232, 387
 Whittlesea-Mere, 239
 Wigeon, 255, 271
 Wight, Isle of, 84, 337
 Wild Birds Preservation Act, 412
 William the Conqueror, his raven standard, 138
 Wimborne, 141; Abbey, 333; stream, 186
 Woking, 151
 Wolfeton, 334
 Wolmer Forest, 178
 Wood, J. G., *My Feathered Friends*, 70 *note*
 Woodbury Hill, 338; fair, 207
 Woodhouse, Mr Edward, 322
 Woodhouse, Miss Ellen, 366
 Woodpecker, the green, 238, 279, 394; its structure, 404; "laugh," 405; pet names, 405; habits, 406; "sounding" a tree, 407; her eggs,

- :
 408 ; pacific nature, 409 ; her young, Wynn Green, 361
 411
 Woodsford, 231 ; Castle, 333
 Wordsworth, Canon Christopher, his
 paraphrase on the poem of St Vin-
 cent, 117 *note*, 180
 Wordsworth, William, on the hoot of
 the owl, 58 ; lines on, 59 ; on the
 magpie, 316, 326
 Wren, the, 29

Yamshooph, the, 16
 Yarrell, *British Birds*, 10 *note*, 325 *note*
 Yellow-hammer, 412
 Yellowham Wood, 38, 151
 Yellowstone Park, 178

 ZÜRICH, 119

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